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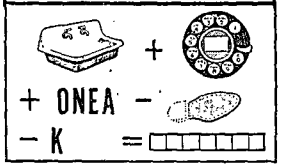

You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

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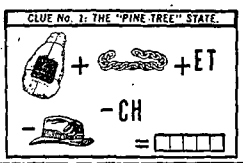

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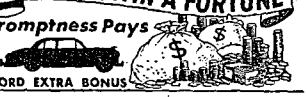

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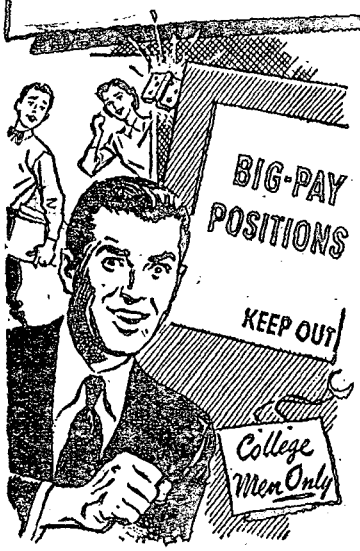

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TODAY'S LOVE STORIES

132 PAGES
ALL NEW STORIES

Volume 16
Number 6
April, 1953

Marie Antoinette Park, Editor

NOVELETS

STARDUST FOR DENNY ..... Charles B. Postl 20
Mark had taught Revelry that love can bring pain. Would she be such a fool as to fall in love again?

LIZA AND THE TORCH ..... Marion Glasgow 85
Liza wished she'd never set eyes on Kelly!

ONLY LOVE IS TRADITIONAL ..... Jane Batton 105
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Gregg was different from anything Andrea had expected . . .

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LILLIAN MEISEL, *Managing Editor*

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[*Turn To Page* 8]

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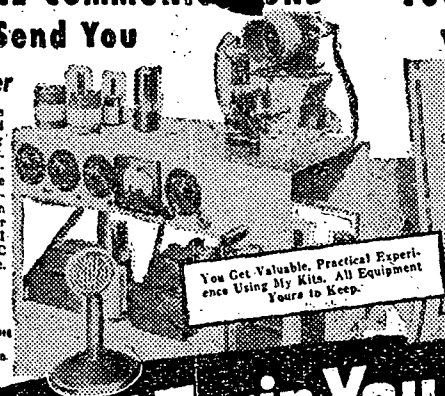

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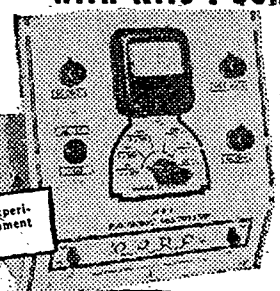

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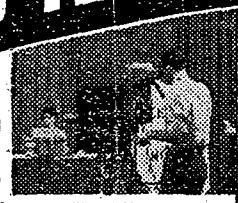

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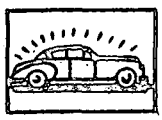

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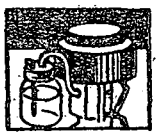

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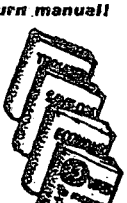

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minaries, Monica Lewis, gives with a fine version of the title tune and a whale of a run-through of a tip-top novelty called SEVENTEEN THOUSAND TELEPHONE POLES. David Rose wields the baton over the MGM Studio Orchestra and Chorus in these numbers. Johnny Green takes the stick for SERENADE FOR A NEW BABY, an orchestral item which accompanies a neat dance sequence in the film. Two of Leslie Caron's dance numbers are featured in the "LILI" waxings: ADORATION and LILI AND THE PUPPETS. And the piquant star joins Mel Ferrer to offer a pert song dubbed "HI-LILI, HI-LO". Hans Sommer conducts the MGM Studio Orchestra here. Top-drawer sound-track fare!

- - - -

Tops In Western & Hillbilly Music:

"Takin' Chances"..."I Can't Live With You"...Porter Wagoner... RCA Victor... One of RCA Victor's newest country-western singers reappears with a socker platter in the best tradition of country music. The 25-year-old balladeer, appearing regularly on Station-KWTO in Springfield, Missouri, hits topside in brisk tempo. Overside slows its pace a bit in tempo, but receives the same type of rugged exposition from the talented youngster.

- - - -

"Curb Service"..."I'll Love You Tomorrow"...Jimmy Smith...RCA Victor... Another of RCA Victor's recent "country" additions, Atlanta's Jimmy Smith, takes off a-spinning on his most vigorous disc to date. The super-active singer, appearing on radio and television over WSB, Atlanta, and owner of his own western night club, does a slick and humorous job on top-side. The other side is in a sentimental vein, and gets an equally impressive going-over. Jimmy is also in the construction business, and the way he bulldozes these two sides gives a clear indication of his impressive style.

- - - -

"Pick Up Truck"..."I Believe I'm Entitled To You"...Bub Hobbs... MGM... Good listening comes your way via Bub Hobbs' latest MGM release...as always with Bud. Top-deck of his new yellow-and-black label waxing holds a neat novelty that's a lot in the mood of HEY! GOOD LOOKIN'. Might be as big a hit, too! Flip side offers a peach of a ballad called I BELIEVE I'M ENTITLED TO YOU.

- - - -

"Do You Live What You Preach"..."I'll Live With God"... Louvin Brothers...MGM... Record fans have come to know that they can depend upon the Louvin Brothers, Ira and Charles, for good recordings of sturdy, old-time gospel hymns. The boys have many good MGM recordings of religious songs to their credit, but none more appealing than their latest. The hymns featured this time are DO YOU LIVE WHAT YOU PREACH and I'LL LIVE WITH GOD, both composed by the singers themselves. The words are thoughtful, the tunes are easy-to remember, and the singing offers the sort of close country harmony that you'll love.

THE END

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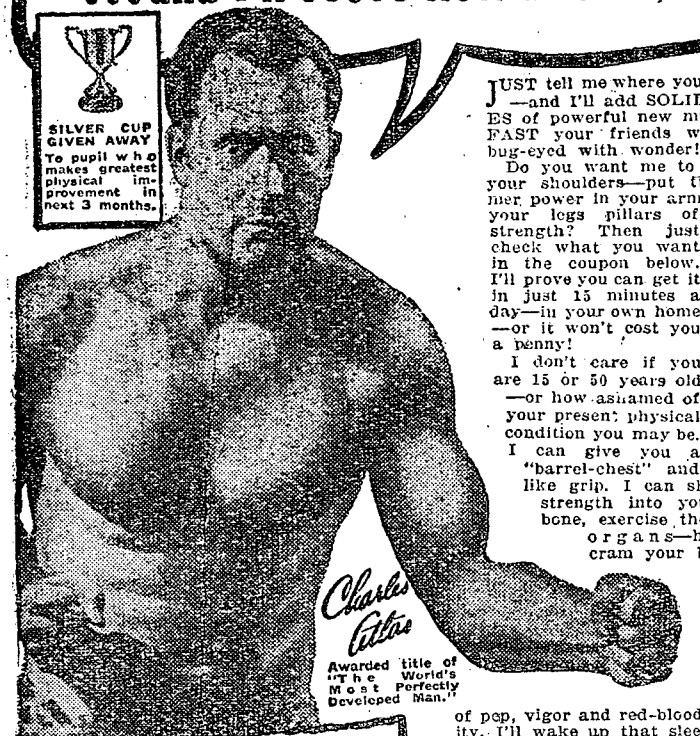
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He was taking his own inventory in the rear view mirror...

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Maybe the perspective was different, but it was as if she were seeing the man for the first time.

Concerto for Heartstrings

by Virginia Nielsen

SHE SHOULD be feeling something, Rachel told herself as she stepped into the elevator, if it were nothing more than just a prickle of excitement.

After all, she had just promised to marry Alfred Horton, Jr., who would have been considered a catch by most any debutante of the past ten years. And she felt as calm and collected as if she had said, "Yes, Mr. Horton," to a remark of her employer's about the weather. There was a nagging little question in her mind, but she just could not seem to *feel* anything at all.

"Shock," she told herself. It would wear off when she walked into the inner sanctum of the city's swankest jeweler to pick out a diamond as Mr. Horton—Al—had instructed her to do.

Perhaps she had shown more reaction than she felt when he called the famous shop and made an appointment for her, for a smile tinged with irony had deepened the corners of his mouth.

"Choose the ring you want, Rachel, then take the rest of the day off. I'll pick up the ring later and bring it to your apartment tonight for a proper proposal."

That faintly ironic smile was as familiar to her as was his gesture of running a slender hand back over his thinning fair hair. She had been his private secretary for three years now, his Girl Friday, his confidante, his sharpest critic and most loyal admirer. She thought she knew Alfred Horton, Jr.

A charming, slightly cynical young man, quite aware of his superior advantages and his eligibility, enjoying an orderly and urbane bachelorhood. She was aware that his proposal could not have been an impulsive thing, in spite of the surprising way he had taken her in his arms in the office just now. Yet it had come so unexpectedly it left her numb.

Mrs. Alfred Horton, Jr. *Small-town girl makes good.* And surely the feeling she had now, an odd sinking

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sensation, was due solely to the downward swoop of the elevator.

Or could she be a little afraid, beneath this icy calm?

But she would have been a fool to say anything but yes, an utter fool! Already Al Horton was the focal point of all her loyalty, her energy and practically all her waking thought. He might as well have her love as well, but she had never really expected him to ask it.

And the nagging little question returned. With his pick of the city—*why me?*

"Taxi?"

Rachel had been looking right through the car parked at the curb because it seemed at first glance full of faces. Now she gave it a second look and saw the faces were three—the driver, a curly-haired young man with laughing eyes and gentle lines around his mouth, and the two tow-headed boys of pre-school age who gave her shy smiles from the front seat.

"Taxi, miss?" the curly-haired young man repeated with a note of urgency.

"You're not already hired?" She hesitated, though it was obvious the rear seat was empty.

"Nope," he said adding cheerfully, "Don't worry about the kids. They'll behave. Won't you, boys?"

The boys nodded shyly.

RACHEL OPENED the door and climbed in. Immediately two heads turned around as if they were on pivots, and four wide blue eyes began taking inventory.

"Isn't this somewhat unusual?" she asked the driver.

He had been taking his own inventory in the rear-view mirror, and his eyes told her he warmly admired what he saw.

"It's just for today," he said. "Their mother is in the hospital finding a little sister for them—they hope. Don't you, boys?"

"We hope," the oldest one affirmed shyly.

"And the baby-sitter is in the hospital, too, having her appendix out."

"You mean they will be riding with you all day?" Rachel said, shocked. "But wasn't there anyone else?"

"To make a long story short—no. Not until tomorrow. It seemed to be up to me today. So here we are. And the boys are having the time of their lives. Aren't you, fellows?"

The two blond heads, still twisted around, nodded vigorously, while the eyes remained fixed on hers.

Rachel found the laughter that bubbled up inside her was suspiciously close to tears. It was as if the plight of the little family, temporarily motherless, had wakened her numbed emotions, arousing the feelings she had not been able to summon for her unexpected engagement.

"Where to?" The young driver was smiling at her in the mirror.

She named the jeweler's shop and saw something go out of his smile before she looked away. It was a name to conjure with, to be murmured by mink-coated women and older men with cheeks freshly pinked by massage and lotions. It was not a name for the ordinary, for the secretary and the stenographer.

Rachel could still blush. She looked fixedly away from the front seat as the taxi pulled out from the curb. And then she heard a small childish treble, addressed in her direction.

"Why is your face red?"

She could feel the fire deepen. She looked up and met the laughing eyes of the driver.

"Tell him to mind his own business," he said. "His name is Dave."

Something warm and curious happened to Rachel. She heard herself laugh. "Mind your own business, Davy," she said pleasantly.

Dave laughed back at her. "Your face is red," he repeated, frankly teasing now. And the smaller one parrotted, "Your face is red!"

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"That's enough, fellows. You heard what the lady said."

They continued to gaze at her over the back of the seat and now their faces were filled with laughter and liking. She felt again that curious nearness of tears. She hadn't known she could feel like this. All the time, under her smart Girl Friday veneer, had there been this warm maternal hunger? Had Al Horton sensed it? Was that why—?

A flood of tenderness engulfed her as she saw before her inner eye a miniature Alfred Horton, Jr. He would be tow-headed, too. And such a very proper little boy. But how she would love him!

The cab was pulling up before the famous jeweler's. A doorman stepped forward. On an impulse Rachel said, "Will you wait, please?" After all, this was a special day.

The driver touched his hat, and as she crossed the sidewalk she saw from the corner of her eye two little figures scrambling to their knees the better to watch her go.

Behind the silk-draped doors was heavy luxurious quiet. Her feet sank deeply into the carpeting and gold-leaf mirrors multiplied her small neat figure indefinitely.

She mentioned Al's name, and was bowed into another room, waved into a comfortable chair. A sleek young man seated himself across a table from her and opened a velvet box.

"Mr. Horton suggested a solitaire. Is that satisfactory?"

His voice was painfully cultivated. And Rachel's ears were keen enough to detect that it was an affected imitation of Al's natural way of speaking. That amused her, set her at her ease.

"Good. Then you have only to select the setting."

It did not take long.

"Would you like to see the stone we have set aside for Mr. Horton's approval?"

Another velvet box came open and an incredible gem winked up at her. All the unreality came flooding back then and she was walking in a dream world again.

She thanked the urbane young man and walked out of the room, to face once more the unending images in the mirrored walls, to struggle through the miles of deep carpeting toward the shirred draperies lining the front doors.

THE HOMELY taxi, with its flag down and its meter ticking, and two overcoated cherubs wildly waving at her from the front seat, looked like home.

Gratefully she sank back on the rear cushions and gave the address of her apartment.

"I just called the hospital," the driver volunteered. "No news yet."

"I see. Have the boys had lunch?"

"I bought them some hamburgers about an hour ago."

"Hamburgers!"

"They're crazy about hamburgers."

"What about their naps?"

"Guess they'll just have to do without today," he said cheerfully.

"But they'll be cross as bears by five o'clock. They'll drive you and your customers crazy."

She was fighting another impulse, unsuccessfully. She suspected it had been in the back of her head even before she went into the jeweler's.

"Look, why not let them come home with me this afternoon? I can give them their naps and feed them a proper supper—"

The look that sprang to the eyes reflected in the rear-view mirror made her feel suddenly dizzy.

But he hesitated. "I don't know as their mother would approve—"

Her impulsive plan took on a surprising urgency. It's only for this afternoon, she told herself, beating down the suspicion that Al would not approve, either.

"Please!" she begged, her eyes shining. "I have the afternoon free, and I would so love—you don't know

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how much it would mean to me—"

"Want to, fellows?"

She loved the way he put it up to them.

Davy hesitated. "Would we have to nap?"

"Sure thing," he said firmly.

She saw the refusal in their faces and quickly urged, "But not all afternoon. And I know some swell games."

"And then can we ride in the taxi again?" Davy was obviously determined to bargain for every last ounce of advantage.

"Yes, after supper you can ride again, maybe to the hospital to see Mommy."

They agreed, at that.

There was something about the way the taxi-driver lifted the two boys out and hoisted the younger one to his shoulder that tugged at her heart-strings. It gave her a nostalgic feeling, almost as if she were saying goodbye to something in her heart. But what?

Upstairs he looked around her pleasant orderly apartment with eyes that admired even while they seemed amused. "Want to make a bet it won't look like this when I pick them up?"

"As if I cared!"

Their eyes met, tangled in confusion for a moment, then looked away. Why, Rachel! she told herself. The father of two children—no, three!

She made her voice carefully cool. "I promise to take the best of care of them. Please don't worry about them."

"You're being awfully good. I'll pick them up about five thirty, okay? I'll be off duty then."

He knelt down with an arm around each boy and had a heart-to-heart talk with them about the way they should behave. The two yellow heads nodded solemnly and two piping "goodbyes" followed him to the door.

"They're darlings," Rachel whispered. "You don't know how lucky you are."

Just as she closed the door on him she thought his eyes were startled. Probably never thought of himself as lucky. Well, he was! So was that girl in the hospital.

And I'm lucky, too, she told herself firmly. She was going to be Mrs. Alfred Horton, Jr., with a diamond ring like a mushroom—well, almost.

"You said you knew some games," Davy accused her.

THE NEXT half hour was breathless. When Rachel finally got them both down for a nap the apartment looked like a baby cyclone had streaked through it and she herself felt almost as if she had ridden it. Just as she sank into an easy chair the telephone rang.

It was Al. "Rachel?" he said.

She had never got over being surprised at how much younger his light-bodied voice sounded over the telephone. But he wasn't old! It was just his thinning hair.

"Yes?"

"How would you like to honeymoon in Bermuda?"

The feeling of unreality slid over her again. Bermuda. Shorts and pink houses and palm trees. Or was that some place else out of a book?

"Why, fine—Al."

"Good. Something's come up since you left the offic I've got to fly down there, and I c n get two reservations on the plane tonight—"

"*Tonight!*" She felt bewildered. She was trying to imagine what could have come up, what connection it could have with Bermuda, but her mind was blank.

"Can you be ready?" he asked humbly. "It seems such a waste to go alone. We can be married. I'll phone ahead to make the arrangements. You can shop there for anything you need. Just take an overnight case for the plane. —Rachel?"

She could not say anything, and he added more briskly, "After all, there is no reason why we should wait, is there?"

She moistened her lips and said, "No. No reason at all."

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"Good! The plane leaves at eight fifteen. I'll pick you up at seven sharp."

"I'll be ready," she said faintly.

Dead center again. The emotions the two little boys and their curiously unharassed father had thawed for her frozen over once more. Like an automaton she went into the shower and began washing her hair. It was short. It would dry quickly. A girl should marry with clean hair.

Involuntarily she thought of the fuss there would be over his wedding if he were marrying one of his little debutantes. Maybe that was part of why he had chosen her?

She pressed a tailored suit and laid out her best set of underwear. She packed her small store of cosmetics and the nightie she had given herself last Christmas and not yet worn.

She was dimly aware that it was the last time she would be doing some of these things for herself. She was aware, too, that the nagging doubt had returned.

"Of course I'll be happy!" she told herself angrily. Once she got used to the idea— But Bermuda! On four hours notice. It occurred to her that she might not know Al Horton as well as she had thought.

"Boo!"

She screamed and whirled around to shrieks of treble laughter and a scurry of movement as two small figures bore down on her from the bedroom door. The nap was over and so was her period of quiet.

There were hands and faces to be washed, shoes to be tied and buttons to fit into buttonholes. While this was being taken care of they discussed supper.

"Billy doesn't like carrots," Davy told Rachel, a bit anxiously.

"Oh?"

"Billy doesn't like spinach, either."

"How about string beans? Or peas? Or mixed vegetables?"

Davy's blue eyes mirrored a struggle. Finally he said, "Billy doesn't like vegetables."

"What does Billy like?"

"Cookie," announced Billy, who had been taking the conversation in, his look going seriously from Rachel's face to Davy's and back again.

"We will have soup and crackers and a glass of milk," Rachel said firmly.

"Mommy always gives us dessert."

"For dessert, an apple."

There were no more complaints. Rachel felt just a little smug as the black hands of the kitchen clock moved together at five thirty. Any moment now her charges' father would come and find them sitting at the fold-away kitchenette table, presentably neat, docilely eating soup and drinking milk.

BUT THE young father did not come. The black hands separated and moved toward six o'clock. Rachel cleared the table with quick gestures that betrayed her growing nervousness to the two boys.

Al would arrive promptly at seven, she knew. Furthermore she must be ready to leave immediately, or they might miss their plane.

She shooed the boys away from the table, folded it and placed the chairs against the wall.

"Go and play in the living room while I take my shower," she instructed them.

Dimly through the splash of the shower she heard noises. Noises like a steady pounding, punctuated with youthful squeals of delight. He must have arrived.

But when she turned the water off, all was silent in the apartment except for the shrill signal of the telephone. She grabbed a towel and gave herself a hasty dry before she slipped into her robe.

"Telephone! Telephone!" the boys were shrieking now at the bathroom door.

When she emerged Davy ran ahead

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of her shouting, "Shall I answer it? Shall I?"

"Better let me take it, Davy."

"Better let you take it," he repeated importantly, standing beside her.

She was so sure she would hear the young taxi-driver's voice that she remembered distinctly exactly how he sounded. But it was not the taxi-driver. It was the blonde divorcee in the apartment below hers.

"Darling," she drawled in weary tones, "those wild horses you have up there—could you possibly stable them or something? The din down here is shocking."

Rachel was not amused. With an effort she held her temper and promised peace and quiet.

"What were you playing, Davy?" she asked, turning from the phone.

"Indians," he said, his face lighting up. "Like this—"

"Never mind!" Rachel said hastily. "That was the lady downstairs. She asked us why we didn't play cut-outs for a change."

"You mean paper cut-outs?" Davy said scornfully.

But she persuaded him with the kitchen scissors and a home-and-garden magazine and a word or two about building houses and planting gardens around them.

It was now six thirty. Rachel laid out the young architects' coats and caps on a living room chair and returned to her dressing. Her fingers were trembling a little, and she was beginning to talk to herself.

"All those things in the icebox, throw them away—that mess in the living room, horrors!—but get yourself dressed first—be ready, that's the important thing—if there's been an accident—"

No, not that. Think about something else. *Something's gone wrong at the hospital*— No, no. Not that, either. He's too nice a guy—

Whoa, Rachel! What do you know about him, anyway? Are you a lightning judge of character, then? How do you know he didn't go out and get drunk, with the kids off his hands? He was certainly taking the birth of a third child right in stride, wasn't he?

Did he take the day off when the baby-sitter got appendicitis? No, he just bundled the boys into his taxi and gave them the ride of their lives and fed them hamburgers. Rather sweet, at that, because with five mouths to feed, a day's wages—

The doorbell rang, and she heard the shrill, unintelligible shrieks and winced with the blonde divorcee downstairs as four sturdy feet slid down the sofa to thud against the floor.

"Thank heaven!" she thought, and started for the living room. She was well into the room before she realized it was Al Horton who stood just inside the door, looking stunned and for once in his urbane bachelorhood, completely at a loss.

RACHEL cringed from the sight of the room. The paper cut-outs had effectively littered sofa and carpet. The small coats and caps had spilled over from their chair onto the floor. Davy had scattered the magazines trying to find another one to cut, and Billy had found the bookcase and begun pulling books out of the shelves.

Al visibly gathered his poise around him. "Where did you get the little demons?"

He said it pleasantly enough, and she recognized his habit of irony. Nevertheless, her nerves were ragged and she was unreasonably irritated.

"They're simply normal children," she said coldly. "I'm keeping them for their father."

"And what is their mother doing?"

"Having a baby."

"Oh," Al said, and his poise slipped again. Rachel found she was enjoying this.

"Well," Al said, and ran his hand over the thin spot. "Well. We'd better return them now. You're ready, I hope?"

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"I'm all ready," Rachel said steadily, ignoring the litter she would leave behind her. "As soon as their father comes for the boys we can go."

Al Horton glanced at his wristwatch. "What time is he coming?"

She hesitated. "Any minute now."

"He's coming at five thirty," Davy volunteered importantly.

"Five thirty!" Al echoed. He looked quickly at Rachel and surprised her guilty flush. "He was supposed to pick them up at five thirty and hasn't come yet? Have you tried to phone him?"

Rachel shook her head.

"Why not? Where is he?"

"Driving a taxi."

"What company?"

"Yellow."

Al stepped over the litter on the carpet and picked up the telephone. "What's his name?"

"I don't know."

Al stared at her. "*You don't know?*"

He thought she was crazy. And maybe she was. Rachel stooped swiftly. "Davy, listen! What's your other name? Tell me all your name. Can you?"

"Davy Benson."

She hugged him. Al was already dialing the taxi company and asking for Mr. Benson. But he turned back from the phone with a look that had tightened.

"They don't have a Benson," he said coldly. "He doesn't drive for them."

Rachel's breath caught in her throat.

"You'd better tell me where you got these children."

Blindly she told the story.

"Where's the mother? What hospital?"

"I don't know that, either."

"And I thought you were a smart girl," Al said, almost sadly. He glanced briskly at his wrist again. "There isn't time to start calling maternity wards. Besides, I suspect we would get the same answer I received from the cab company. Rachel, my girl, you've been had."

He paused, then said drily, "There is only one thing to do. We'll take them with us and drop them off at the nearest police station on our way to the airport."

"Oh, no!" Rachel cried, recoiling. "I'm sure he'll come back—"

"When?" Al asked icily. "Tomorrow morning? It's very important that we catch that plane, Rachel."

"No, no, no, no!' Davy suddenly began shrieking. "I don't wanna go to the police station!"

Frightened, Billy began to cry.

RACHEL dropped to her knees and hugged the two little figures close. "You're not going anywhere," she promised them quietly. "You're going to stay right here and play like we did this afternoon until your daddy comes for you."

"Rachel, be reasonable! Isn't there someone in the building you can leave them with?"

She looked up at him accusingly. "You frightened them!"

"Rachel, listen to me!" he said, in cold careful tones of command. "You must believe me when I say that I cannot miss that plane. Are you going to be on it with me? Or are you going to play nursemaid to a strange cabbie's children? Which means more to you, those two ragamuffins or our marriage?"

She was looking up at him from her kneeling position. Maybe it was the perspective that was different, but it was as if she saw the man for the first time. Not the sought-after bachelor, the brilliant young businessman, nor the witty employer whose every wish for three years had been her law—but the man himself.

"It isn't these two ragamuffins," she said, over their weeping heads, "but the other one. The one that would be tow-headed, too, but such a perfect little gentleman—like his father"

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Al Horton looked at her with complete bewilderment. It was not becoming.

"I guess I always knew he was just a dream," she said, a little sadly.

"What kind of nonsense are you talking?" he said, in a strained voice.

"Some men just aren't the father type, Al. A woman usually can tell. Seeing you here with these two—" She fell silent, seeing again the face of the young taxi driver, tenderness in his eyes, gentle laughter lines around his mouth.

"For Pete's sake, Rachel! Let's get out of here. Bring the children. All right, I'll think of something. But that plane won't wait." His voice sharpened *"Rachel!"*

She shook her head. She saw the dawning incredulity in his eyes and an anger shook her that he could have been so sure.

But he had lost that habitual cynical assurance now. "I—I can't go without you, Rachel. I need you desperately."

Stubbornly she shook her head again. He looked at his watch and said "Damn!" under his breath.

"Rachel, I'll send for you." It was an urgent demand.

When she shook her head the third time he lost his temper. She bent over the boys still in the circle of her arms, telling her ears not to listen to him, but her face grew pale. At last the door slammed behind him.

Billy's sobs died way. Davy's treble sounded loud and overshrill in the sudden quiet.

"Why is my daddy coming?"

"Why?" Rachel repeated, confused. "Don't you want him to come?"

Davy studied her a moment. Then he said casually, "Oh, sure." And to Billy, "I'm an Indian! Whooo—oooo—"

Billy ran after him, screaming with laughter. After a startled moment Rachel sat back wearily. "Let *her* come up and 'stable' them, darn it!" she said.

Presently she followed them into the bedroom and began to unpack her overnight bag.

IT WAS NINE o'clock when the doorbell rang. Rachel glanced once around the room. The paper litter had been swept away, the books and magazines returned to their proper place, and the two boys sat side by side on the sofa where she had been telling them stories. She opened the door.

The young cabbie stood there, a warm smile lighting his weary face.

"It's about time—," Rachel was beginning sternly, when she realized what Davy and Billy were shouting. Not "Daddy!" but *"Uncle Bill!"*

She gasped, "You're not their father?"

He shook his head "They're my sister's children."

"But—"

"Her husband has been up at the hospital with her all day. She's had a rough time of it."

"But I thought—" Laughter and a heady realization came to her, and she saw its reflection in his eyes. They looked at each other, sharing a magnificent joke.

Rachel began, "Davy might have told me—," and at the same time he began, "I'm sorry I'm so late—" They stopped, both began again, then both broke into laughter.

Rachel said, "Then your name isn't Benson."

"I'm sorry. It's Bill Linden."

"I'm Rachel Jones."

"I got it from your mailbox." He laughed at her look. "You don't think I'd go off and leave the boys without knowing?"

"No—you wouldn't."

"I was detained at the airport. I hope I didn't upset any plans for tonight?"

"Oh, no!" Rachel said, a tinge of hysteria in her voice. "Not at all!"

"Here's my coat," Davy cried, thrusting it imperiously between them. "Coat!" echoed Billy.

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Bill Linden stooped to their level. "Guess who's down at the hospital with your Mommy and Dad?"

"A baby sister!" Davy shouted.

"Know-it-all!"

Billy shrieked, "Know-it-all, know-it-all!" and they danced around him in a jig that would surely drive the blonde divorcee out-of-doors if she were still in her apartment downstairs.

Bill Linden looked over their heads at Rachel. "Have you had your dinner?"

"As a matter of fact, no."

He laughed, and his eyes had an I-told-you-so glint. "Want to come with me while I deliver the boys to their father? Then I'll buy you a steak."

"You owe me a steak," she said.

AFTER TWO sleepy boys had been transferred to their father's car and a strained and older edition of Davy had assured Bill his sister and the new baby were going to be all right, Rachel climbed in the front seat of the cab.

"You never did tell me what kept you so long," she reminded him.

He shrugged. "I picked up the wrong fare at five fifteen. He took me way out in the country and talked me into waiting and bringing him back to the airport. It was right on the way, so— But there I got mixed up in a manhunt. The revenue boys had been tipped off that some bigshot was ducking out ahead of a tax evasion scandal and had a net out."

"Really?"

"Yeah. They picked him up, too. He had a ticket to Bermuda"

"Bermuda?" Rachel said faintly.

"Yeah. British territory, you know."

"I know. Pink houses and—and palm trees—" And beyond the long blue arm.

He looked at her oddly. "That's what I hear."

"Did—did you see the man? What did he look like?"

"Tall and thin. Youngish, Smooth-looking. Not exactly the type you'd expect to be mixed up in something like that."

"No," Rachel murmured. "Not at all the type." And yet—that casual assumption of superiority that had charmed her and so many people into taking him at his own valuation. Had he considered himself superior enough to ignore the laws of the land? The faint cynical slant his smile always took came back to her, and she felt slightly ill.

"Why?" Bill Linden was asking. "Know the fellow?"

"I—think so. I—used to work for him."

Was that why he wanted her out of the office this afternoon? Maybe even why he asked her to marry him? Because then she couldn't testify against him if she ever did learn he had falsified some of her records? Buying that huge diamond for her to wear—that was one way of carrying assets out of the country with you.

"Yeah?" Bill commented briefly. And, "Too bad."

It was a distinct shock to her vanity. Her question, "Why me?" had been badly answered.

She thought of the scene at the airport then, the grim-faced men, the reporters and photographers closing in. She could almost feel the heat and glare from their flash bulbs. She shivered.

"I'm glad your cab was there this morning," she said shakenly, "you and your angels—"

"You can still call them angels?" he teased her.

"Guardian angels. Straight from heaven."

He looked at her, not fully understanding but pleased. "You know something, though? I'm glad they're not really mine."

She moved a little closer and smiled at him. "You know something?" she said. "So am I."

THE END

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All at once, she became aware of his nearness...

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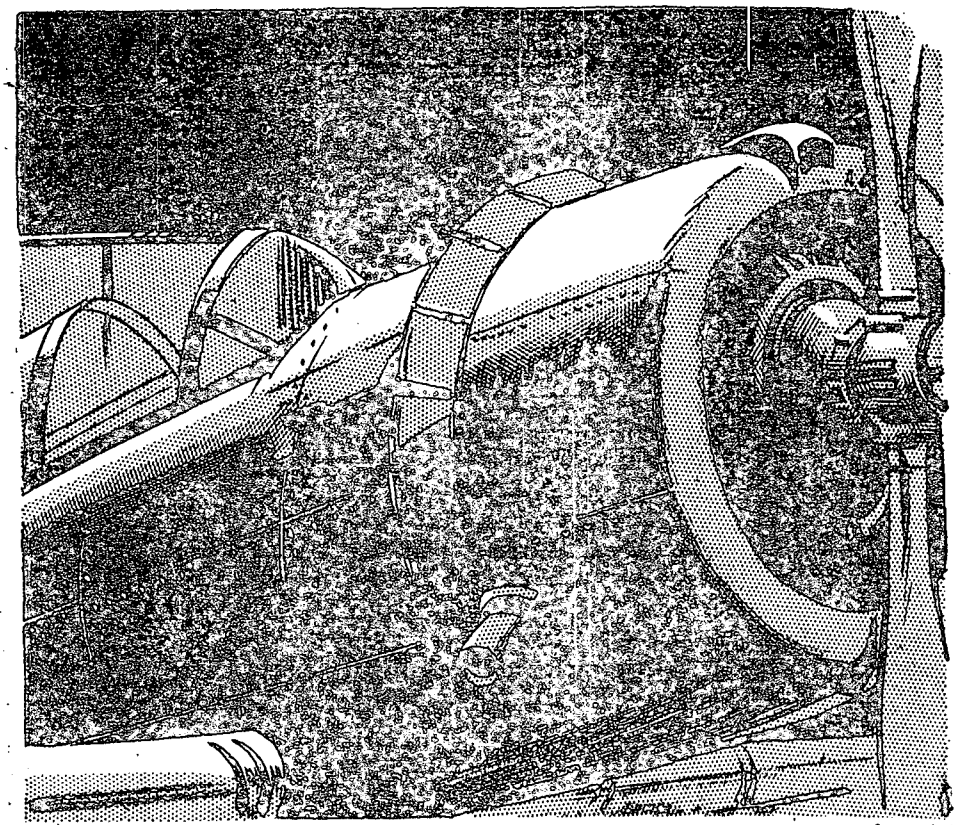

Star Dust For Denny

ABSORBING NOVELET by Charles B. Postl

FOR THE past hour the limousine had skidded and slipped over the mud road, and Denise Keith's arms ached from gripping the arm rest to avoid tumbling to the car floor. On the front seat of the limousine a colored chauffeur in olive livery watched the road carefully.

"We'll be there in another moment, Miss," he assured her.

Denny heartily hoped so. The windows were closed against the driving

Denny realized that she had handed her heart to a man who was bluntly telling her that he didn't want it!

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rain, and the air in the car was stuffy. The bleak swamp-land they were passing through gave her the creeps, and she was beginning to wonder dispiritedly if she hadn't made a mistake in accepting this position. Of course she had had to run away from Mark, but there must be other secretary-companion jobs; she needn't have come to this Louisiana wilderness.

But it was too late for those speculations for the car rolled into a private gate. They passed through a stretch of graveled drive bordered by ancient oaks, weirdly festooned with moss, and pulled up before an enormous stone building, fashioned like a Moorish castle with narrow windows and battlements rising from a tiled roof.

Denny felt a moment of actual fear at entering the forbidding house. But Washington, the chauffeur, stood waiting in the rain. "Go right in, Miss. The door's unlocked," he advised.

So forcing back her childish apprehension she jumped out and ran up stairs that swam with rivers of rain. She slipped inside the door and then blinked in the sudden light.

When her eyes grew accustomed to the brightness she saw that she was in a mahogany paneled hall lighted by a crystal chandelier that hung in the well of the winding stairs.

Ancestral portraits, the paint cracked on the time-worn canvases, looked down at her from gilded frames. From an opened doorway at the far end of the hall there drifted a haze of cigarette smoke and the sensuous beat of a tango.

As Denise hesitated, wondering just how to proceed, a red-haired girl wearing a jade silk frock and clutching a bottle of champagne in her scarlet tipped fingers emerged into the hall, and, like a flash of emerald, sped toward the stairs. Her cheeks were flushed, and she laughed tauntingly as she ran. But her laughter abruptly changed to cries of protest when a blond man dashed after her with long-legged strides, easily caught her, retrieved the champagne and held her a squirming prisoner.

"That's no fair, Revelry," she protested.

"Everything's fair in love and war," he said grimly.

"And this is?" She eyed him deliberately.

"War. I told you that you'd had enough champagne and I meant it."

"Oh, you're such a big...strong... masterful man!" She drawled out the words like an impudent child.

His jaw tightened, and he set the champagne down on a stair. "Oh, I am, am I?" he muttered as he caught her to him, forced her head back and roughly placed his mouth on hers.

Denny lowered her eyes, stared at the carpet. How in the world had she ever gotten into such an embarrassing contretemps she asked herself helplessly. Then, as she retreated toward the door, she bumped into a potted palm standing on a marble stand and sent it crashing to the floor. The sound it made was like an exploding bomb. When she looked up in panic she found the blond stranger staring at her, a startled expression on his lean-planed face. Immediately he came forward. "Say, I hope you haven't hurt yourself?" he said concernedly. "That damn plant should never have been put there. It's always being knocked over."

When he reached her Denny saw that his eyes were as blue as the sea back home on a clear day, and that they were shaded by long, thick lashes that were just a shade darker than his sleek blond hair.

"You're Mother's new secretary, aren't you?" he smiled. "Mother is expecting you. I'm her son, Revel Bourne. My friends call me Revelry, for good reason, too," he added ruefully.

"How do you do. I'm terribly sorry I made this mess," Denny apologized, eyeing the spilled dirt with distaste.

"Don't give it a thought. Frost—that's our butler—will have it cleared

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away. But now you must meet our nearest neighbor. Flame Merriwether. Flame, this is Denise Keith."

"Hel...lo. Welcome to Comargo." Flame smiled as she walked forward, but Denny noted that there was no warmth in her smile and that her green eyes were coldly appraising as they swept Denny's slim figure.

"LOOK, YOU'RE probably tired after your long train trip and want a rest. I'll have Frost show you to your room."

Revelry touched a bell pull hanging near the door and almost at once a pink cheeked man with silvery hair came into the hall.

"This is Miss Keith, Frost. Please show her to her room and then have Washington bring up her bags."

Denise felt like an actress in an insufficiently rehearsed part as she murmured her thanks and moved toward the stairs. When she followed Frost's ascending figure Revelry called after her, "I'm dining out so I won't see you at dinner, Miss Keith, but how about breakfast at ten?"

Denny turned and stared down at his grinning, upturned face. As their eyes met and locked she felt as though an invisible trap had just been sprung holding her immobile beneath his searching gaze. Involuntarily her eyes traced his finely chiseled profile: the bold, sharp nose; the square jaw and stubborn chin with the faintest hint of a cleft in it; the smiling full lips that revealed a row of even white teeth. Then, without reason, she shivered, as though a premonitory wind blew over her. "That's much too late for a working girl," she managed evasively but as she turned away and hurried after Frost she caught a glimpse of Flame Merriwether and the blazing antagonism she saw in her green eyes was a distinct shock.

Denny's room was on the second floor at the rear of the house. It was comfortable and had its own bath. Even though the furnishings were less elaborate than the ornate elegance of the first floor, Denny realized she would do very well here with the writing desk and lounge chair, the bedside radio, and the shelf of best sellers over the fireplace.

She busied herself with unpacking the bags Washington carried up for her, hung her dresses in a neat row in the big wardrobe. She was just deciding on a relaxing tub when a maid knocked on the door and informed her that Mrs. Bourne would see her now.

Denny felt a quick stir of apprehension. What if she shouldn't prove satisfactory? She couldn't return home to Aunt Martha, not with Mark still in Pineway. She didn't even want to see him again. But then she told herself reassuringly that of course she would please Mrs. Bourne. She must!

The room the maid led her to was on the same floor but in the front wing of the house. Here the furnishings were in ivory, the chairs delicately carved and gilded in French design, and the carpet was an antique oriental that would make any collector drool. In a chair beside a window, with a pull-up table drawn over her lap, a woman sat playing solitaire. Denny knew she was over sixty, but with her hair cut short, softly waved and tinted a steely grey, her carefully massaged face knowingly made up, and her slim figure trim as a young girl's in a gay print dress she looked not more than fifty.

She played another card after Denny entered, then looked up and sighed. "Miss Keith! How nice of you to come to us. I hope Washington met your train on time." She stretched out a beautifully cared for hand to an ottoman beside her.

"You're not going to have a very enthusiastic opinion of Comargo, seeing it first time in this horrid weather. Even though it's terribly old fashioned it's really a beautiful old place, in spite of its isolation. Our gardens are famous; in fact, some magazine sent people out yesterday to take photographs of them."

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Denny cleared her throat. "I'm sure it is," she murmured politely.

Mrs. Bourne nodded. "And I believe you'll like living here. The services I require aren't too strenuous or confining. Just letters, household accounts, shopping... Things like that you know and....."

She stopped, frowned in annoyance when the door opened. "Revel, Miss Keith and I are just getting acquainted. *Must you?*"

Revelry Bourne smiled at his Mother. "I *mustn't* anything, Leela. But Flame's Mother just picked her up on her way home from the Country Club bridge and as I'm dining with the Merriwether's tonight I thought I'd let you know."

Mrs. Bourne seemed pleased with the information. "That's nice," she approved. "Well, better run along and dress. I believe I'll just have Cook send me a tray up here; this tiresome weather is getting on my nerves."

He clicked his heels and winked at Denny. But before he went out he paused, turned around again. "By the way, Leela, do you think ten o'clock is too late to breakfast?"

His face was sober, but Denny saw that his eyes were dancing. For a second his Mother stared at him nonplused. Then she bit her lips impatiently. "Really, Revel, I never understand you. Of course it isn't too late; I abhor early breakfasts. By why in the world do you ask that now?"

"I thought Miss Keith might like to hear your views on the subject," he said blandly as he swung out.

MRS. BOURNE lit a cigarette fretfully. "I adore my son, Miss Keith, but sometimes, I must confess, I can't understand him. You're very young, nineteen your application said, didn't it? Well, I hope only that you won't let Revel upset you. He's extremely self willed and, I'm sorry to say, running a bit wild right now. I don't approve of the set he travels with or this complete lack of respect for anything serious. But there isn't much I can do about it. Since Revel's returned from Korea he seems to resent any kind of authority."

She flicked a bit of cigarette ash into a cloisonne tray, looked up at Denny abruptly. "But Revel *is* attractive if I do say so, and he's apt to be something of a flirt. So be very careful, my dear. Don't be misled. I don't want to lose my nice new secretary." Her lips smiled pleasantly, but her voice carried a distinct warning.

Denny felt her cheeks flush. "I'm not likely to be disturbed by your son, Mrs. Bourne," she said coolly. "I'm interested only in satisfactorily meeting your requirements."

"Good girl." Mrs. Bourne patted Denise's shoulder. "Now let me acquaint you with our staff. You've already met our chauffeur, Washington. He doubles as gardener, too, on occasion. Then there's Frost and Cook downstairs. On this floor we have Maggie who does the bedrooms....."

The assured voice rambled on and Denny tried to listen, but for some inexplicable reason she couldn't concentrate. When Mrs. Bourne finally dismissed her and she returned to her room, Denny realized she hadn't taken in half of what had been told to her. But she knew surely nevertheless

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that Mrs. Bourne needn't have bothered to warn her about Revel. Not with the memory of Mark still tearing at her heart, mercilessly reminding her of the fool she had been.

MAGGIE brought her a dinner tray at seven: broiled lamb chop, grilled potatoes and a crisp salad. The food was delicious but Denny wasn't hungry and only tasted it while she finished the pot of black coffee.

She tried to read after dinner but the odd restlessness that had been unsettling her ever since her arrival increased, and, finally, at eleven o'clock she put her book down, opened the window and peered out at the night. Momentarily the stormy sky had cleared. The air was cool and inviting, and, on a sudden, she decided to take a walk in the gardens. It was only nerves that was bothering her, she argued sternly. This was her very first time away from Aunt Martha's so naturally she'd be excited, and unstrung. A walk would settle her, help her sleep, she thought as she slipped out her room down the winding stairs.

The front door was unlocked, and in a second she was out in the night moving down the garden path. She drew in great breaths of the exhilarating air but when she rounded a landscaped corner of the garden she abruptly stopped.

A man, a tall man with a sweep of husky shoulders was leaning against a moss draped oak tree smoking a cigarette. He was dressed in evening clothes, and the white of his shirt front was a startling blur in the darkness. As though warned of her approach he turned, and Denny saw that it was Revelry Bourne.

For a moment he watched her as if she were a ghost. Then he grinned teasingly. "Don't tell me you breakfast this early, Miss Keith."

Again Denny felt that annoying trapped feeling. "Of course not," she protested nervously. "I couldn't sleep so decided upon a walk."

He was beside her now, watching her face in the moonlight. "I'm glad," he said simply, "because I was feeling lonely as hell out here all by myself."

Denny, remembering Mrs. Bourne's, "Revel is something of a flirt," moved away from him. "What happened to your dinner party?" she asked bluntly.

Revelry laughed. "Flame just learned one of life's important lessons: champagne and lobster don't usually mix. The Merriwether's cook served his special Newburg tonight, and Flame wouldn't listen to my warning; she ate two helpings. Afterward.....well she certainly wished she hadn't. So I came on home." He offered Denny a cigarette, and, when she refused, lit another for himself from his burning stub. "Odd how a quirk in one's innards can louse up an evening's fun, isn't it?"

Without reason his indifferent words sent a wrench in her heart. "I don't believe if I cared about anyone I'd think much about fun if he became ill," she said frankly.

Revelry looked surprised, then his lips sobered. "You would feel that way, wouldn't you?" he said gently.

A sheet of rain drowned out his words abruptly, and Denny looked helplessly about for shelter.

"Come on. The hangar is closest." Revelry grabbed her hand, pulled her down the path to a domed building looming blackly in the night. A moment later, breathless and damp, Denny stood inside its darkness.

"This is where I keep my plane," Revel explained. "Dad had the hangar built for me before he died."

When her eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness Denny dimly made out the outlines of a plane not more than ten feet from her. Something stirred in a corner and, as she wondered fearfully if it were a rat, she couldn't stop the shiver that ran down her spine.

"Are you cold? Here, take my coat."

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BEFORE she could stop him, Revelry stripped off his coat, placed it around her shoulders. When she looked up to thank him she found his face close to hers, felt his breath warm on her cheek. All at once she became aware of his physical proximity, of their isolation in the dark, echoing hangar. Impulsively she drew back. As if her movement released a bond that had previously restrained him, he caught her to him. His free hand slipped behind her head, raised it to meet his. In the dim light his eyes seemed almost black and they glowed with a strange fire.

"Ah, Denny, you feel like a little armful of heaven....." His voice was warm and husky and hearing him use Aunt Martha's beloved name for her caught Denny by surprise, put her momentarily off guard.

Then swiftly Revel's arms tightened, crushing the very breath from her, and he bent his head. Denny was so stunned she was numb to the first experimental touch of his lips, but then feeling returned and she became aware of his lean body against hers, of his mouth caressing her throat, her eyes, her mouth.

Frantically she strained away from him, but her strength was nothing compared to his, and her resistance only strengthened his hold upon her. And then, helplessly, horrifyingly, she felt her lips grow warm and eager beneath his, felt herself responding to his ardent demands while the blood ran like fire through her veins.

She seemed to be slipping down, down into a well of dream like confusion when at last he raised his head and released her.

In the half-light his face took on a strange, Dionysian beauty. He spoke in a voice that was low and warm and unsteady. "Denny, please, please, don't tremble so. I didn't mean to frighten you. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have taken advantage of you like this. But I didn't mean to....."

Denny had control of herself by now. She drew in her breath on a ragged sob. "You....you wolf," she stormed. "But I suppose after what I saw this afternoon I should have expected as much. Obviously you have a talent for this sort of thing."

"Now wait, Denny. Let me explain." He caught her hands in his, pulled her toward him again.

Denny laughed scornfully as she jerked herself free and darted to the door. "Save your explanations for Miss Merriwether," she advised icily as she ran in the rain back to the house.

She was soaked to the skin by the time she raced up the front stairs, and she had to strip off her clothes as she reached her room. But as she slipped gratefully into a warm, padded robe across her outrage and resentment there came a piercing self regret, and she covered her burning face in shame. How could she have kissed Revelry back like that? she asked herself in humiliation and horror. What in the world could have happened to her?

Then sensibly she fought back her panic. She was tired and unstrung from the trip, the strain of meeting Mrs. Bourne and of adjusting herself to new surroundings. The unexpected storm and Revelry's pass at her had taken her completely by surprise. No wonder she had acted crazily! For heaven only knew, she thought bitterly, she was finished forever with that sort of thing. Let all the great music and plays harp about love with a capital L. She wanted none of it. Not when it left you with nothing but an aching memory.

Chapter Two

AT THE very thought of Mark's name, her mind drifted back to the moment they had first met. She had come into the dining room of Aunt Martha's house directly from the kitchen, carrying a

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pan of smoking biscuits, and a slim, dark eyed man had looked up at her and smiled. That had been all there had been to it, but immediately her heart beat had quickened and she felt as if the air in the dining room had grown suddenly stale, making her breathless.

Aunt Martha, gray haired, meticulously neat in a checked gingham apron and presiding at the head of her table, had introduced them. "Denny, this is Mark Farwell, come to Pineway to paint pictures this summer. He'll be boarding with us. Mr. Farwell, my niece, Denise Keith."

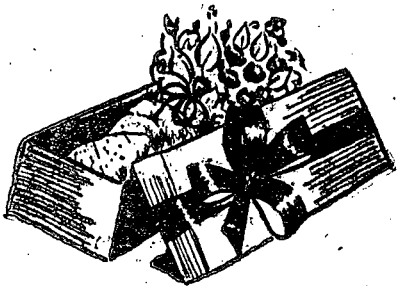
Later that night they had walked beneath the pines that edged the beach. While the sea muttered and threatened Mark told her all about his ambition to become a great landscape painter. Of the scholarship he'd just won that made his stay at this New England artist's colony possible.

But just before they had turned their steps back to Aunt Martha's, he had quite simply taken her in his arms. To sheltered, inexperienced Denny, his kiss had been soul shaking. It was all the excitement of Spring's first bluebells; the terror of a sudden summer storm, and she turned her heart over to him in that tense moment quite as trustingly as a child reaching for an adult hand to guide it across a crowded street.

She never knew afterward where the summer had flown. Aunt Martha's boarders—"paying guests" she always called them—totaled nine, and kept the industrious spinster busy almost every moment of the day, leaving scarcely any time for her beloved gardening. Denny's days were chore-filled too, for after her parents were killed in an auto crash Aunt Martha had stepped in and became both father and mother to Denny, so she wanted always to help her Aunt in any way she could. But in the evenings, after the hearty New England dinner had been served and the Blue Willow dishes were washed and stored in the pine cupboard, Denny would slip into a fresh dress, brush her short-cropped curls into crisp waves, and then, with her vulnerable young eyes shining, hurry to meet Mark beneath the pines.

His talk was all of the wonderful pictures he would one day paint. He never mentioned marriage but Denny didn't worry. Not when later, in the silence of the tall trees his lips would tell her how very much he wanted her.

But one afternoon as she rested on the porch after luncheon, Mark, tormented by a sudden toothache into planning a trip into the city to his dentist, surprised her when he returned home early from his sketching. He found Denny working on a patch-work quilt.



As he dumped his painting gear onto the porch he demanded, amused at her prim industry, "What in the devil are you doing now, Denny?"

She blushed, shyly held up her work for his inspection. "It's a quilt, Mark, The rising star design. For us...." she said with pride.

Suddenly his face went dark, and a hard light narrowed his eyes.

"Wait a minute, Denny. I never said anything about us getting married, did I?"

Bewildered, she stared at him as though he'd gone berserk. "But, Mark, you didn't have to. I knew you loved me, right after that first night."

Her voice quivered, trailed into silence.

HE WAS kneeling beside her now, holding her trembling hands in his. "Look, Denny, I do love you. But I can't marry you. It will be years before I'll be able to support a wife. You haven't any idea what a tough racket

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this painting game is. But I want to become a successful painter more than anything else in the world. And while I'm fighting my way to the top I can't take on responsibilities."

Responsibilities..... The word was like a razor-edged knife slicing into her heart. She felt all the blood drain from her legs, and the garden beyond seemed to sway and dip as though she were viewing it from a tossing shrimp boat in the bay.

Frowning, Mark went on: "I know what happens to guys like me who get married without counting the costs. My Dad was one. He had to give up being an artist after he married and I came along and take a job clerking in a store. And how he hated it! Of course he did his best to hide his feelings and he gave Mother and me everything he could. But as I grew older I could see just what his sacrifice had cost him. Mother knew finally, too. Then neither of them was happy."

His voice sharpened stubbornly. "And I'm never going to make that mistake, Denny. I know I had no right to make love to you under these circumstances but, well, I just couldn't help myself. Surely you can understand that, can't you?"

At nineteen, with her high school days just behind her, Denny's tortured mind hadn't any way of seeing Mark's viewpoint. She knew only that she had impulsively, and humiliatingly, handed her heart to a man who was bluntly telling her now that he didn't want it.

As she struggled to hold back the threatening tears she lifted her chin proudly. "Don't worry, Mark," she assured him bitterly. "You won't *have* to marry me."

"Now, Denny, wait. For Lord's sake listen to me...."

But she hadn't waited or listened, and the next morning when Mark returned from his visit to his dentist in the city, Denny was gone. She had expected Aunt Martha to be stunned when she told her she was going to New York to look for work, that she was tired of Pineway. But astonishingly her Aunt hadn't even seemed surprised. "That so, Denny?" she had said mildly, looking up from the peas she was shelling. "Well I'd best write you a letter to Mrs. Walters then. She's an old friend of mine in New York. Will be only too glad to put you up and get you organized somewhere. She does that kind of work, you know."

Denny hadn't been able to believe her ears, but when her Aunt brought her dinner on a tray to her room that night with the comment, "Thought you'd like to eat here and not be bothered with a passel of fool questions at table," Denise took one suspicious look at her and then she knew that Aunt Martha was perfectly aware of *why* she wanted to leave Pineway so suddenly. And Denny had believed she hid her secret so thoroughly! Impulsively she hugged the wise old darling. "Oh, Aunt Martha, I love you so," she had sobbed.

Afterwards, Mrs. Walters had been everything and more than Aunt Martha had promised. She even secured this coveted position of secretary-companion to the wealthy Mrs. Bourne, prominent southern social leader.

Right away the name of Comargo had intrigued Denny and she was glad that there would be so many miles between her and Mark. She immediately wrote her Aunt the news ordering her not to give her new address to *anyone*, bought what clothes she would need, and, after bidding Mrs. Walters a grateful good-bye, boarded a train for Louisiana.

And now she was at Comargo. Only, she thought fiercely, bringing her thoughts back to the present, she wasn't going to let one mistake spoil her chance of a new life here. She'd forget everything that happened tonight, and she would clearly see that Revelry Bourne had no cause to remember either. If he thought it was fun to flirt with his Mother's new secretary he'd have to change his mind. Because once she had let a man roll

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over her heart with a steam roller was no reason she would repeat her folly. The sooner Revelry found that out the better it would be.

THE NEXT morning the skies were still grey but at least, at the moment of awakening, it wasn't raining. Denise tubbed and dressed, then wandered down to breakfast.

"Good morning, Miss." Frost greeted her pleasantly as he served her crisp toast, iced orange juice and smoking-hot coffee. "You're an early riser I see."

She read the paper he placed before her while she ate, but just as she was pushing back her chair Maggie, the upstairs maid, told her Mrs. Bourne would like to see her.

Denny found her employer propped up by dozens of lace embroidered pillows in a wide carved bed. She was already carefully made up but the morning light wasn't flattering and revealed innumerable lines about her restless eyes and discontented mouth.

"It's going to be another hateful day, Miss Keith, and the dampness will only aggravate my arthritis, worse luck," she said petulantly as Denny came in. "But I've gotten the bright idea of a dinner party for tonight. Cook and I have already made a list of what we'll need. Frost will drive you in town to get them."

Denny quickly scanned the list before folding it and putting it in her pocket. She asked a question about one or two items to make certain she returned with the right articles. Then she hurried to her room for her raincoat and hat.

When she climbed into the station wagon waiting in the drive she was rather excited about her first trip into town. The car rolled swiftly down the drive, out the gates onto the highway. "I think it's going to rain after all, Frost...." she began conversationally turning to the driver. Then she stopped, stared at Revelry in amazement.

He was dressed casually in tan cord slacks, and a blue sports shirt open at the throat. In the early light his hair was very blond, and his eyes were as blue as the pattern on her Aunt Martha's willow dishes.

Denny swallowed hard. "I...I thought Frost was going to drive me into town," she stammered.

Revelry tossed her a quick glance and his lips quirked upward. "Frost will be busy enough as it is with all Mother has planned for him, so I offered my services instead."

"That was indeed thoughtful of you." Her voice was icy.

"Oh, I'm not a bad fellow at all when you get to know me," he said meaningly.

Denny drew her breath in angrily. After his unforgivable behavior last night his casual manner was incredible. But she couldn't tell off the son of her employer so she took refuge in stony silence, moved as far into her corner as she could. She stared out her window all the way in to town, refusing his offer of a cigarette, stubbornly declining to be drawn into any conversation.

When Revelry parked the car in front of the town's smartest food mart, she got out quickly and went into the store for the salted almonds, mint patties, stuffed olives, mangoes.....all the numerous items Cook had ordered. Later, she crossed the street to the gift shop for candles, cocktail napkins, a huge redwood lazy-Susan with ceramic dividers.

BY NOON the back of the station wagon was piled with packages and there wasn't too much room for the case of champagne the delivery boy carried out from the liquor store.

As she waited impatiently under a store awning for Revelry to come out of the florist's it started to sprinkle. By the time he returned it was pouring. "We can't make it back to Comarge in this," he said flatly, "without

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landing in a bayou. Come on, Denny, we'd better pick up a bite of luncheon while we wait for it to clear."

Denny had no desire to share a luncheon table with him today or anytime but she couldn't stand and argue in the rain. So helplessly she dashed across the street with him to the inn. Because of the weather the place was deserted, so they had the entire dining room to themselves.

Denny ordered a club sandwich and declined dessert, but Revelry ate an enormous steak. Then he topped off his meal with pie and ice cream.

Denny lit a cigarette and sardonically eyed him as he finished his pie. An icy silence had lain between them all during the meal but now, on a sudden, Revelry looked up and spoke. "Gee, it must be tough having to watch your diet," he sympathized. "But you know, I wouldn't have believed that you're inclined to run to fat. You seem a little on the skinny side to me."

Denny almost choked on a curl of cigarette smoke. Even though his eyes were innocent, his lips twitched, revealing his inner amusement, and she would have liked to toss his ice cream and pie in his smugly handsome face.

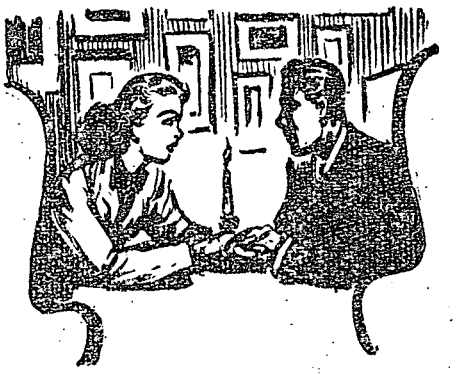
Instead she only smiled. "Generally I eat like a horse," she said sweetly. "I was simply considering your pocketbook this noon." She hoped he would have the grace to blush, but instead he threw back his head, roared delightedly.

Denny ignored his laughter and after he paid their check he said, sobering, "The rain's stopped for the moment. Suppose we make a dash for it?"

Their return to Comargo was as silent as their trip in to town, but just before they reached the big house, Revelry stopped the car. Immediately he turned in his seat, faced Denny. His eyes were very earnest, his voice slightly husky. "Look, Denny," he said humbly. "Let's have enough of this feuding. I want to apologize for last night. Blame it on the moon, the cocktails I'd had at Merriwether's. Only believe me, please, when I say I'm truly sorry."

Startled, Denny raised her eyes to his. "It doesn't matter," she began when quickly he silenced her.

"But it does. That's just the point. You mustn't go on thinking whatever it is you have been thinking about me. Just because you witnessed that little scene yesterday doesn't mean I'm really a wolf.



"Flame and I were kids together. She's wild and spoiled and reckless but I understand her. I guess because I'm like that myself. Anyway yesterday we'd been whiling away a dreary afternoon dancing, playing cards. Flame drank too much champagne and I wouldn't let her have any more. When she ran away with the bottle I went after her. I guess maybe I wasn't too clear headed either for....well, you saw the rest. But it didn't mean anything. She's just a restless, discontent kid, understand?" Gently he reached for her hands, cupped them in his big brown ones.

The touch of his hands on hers was like an electric shock. Denny pulled her own hands free as though they'd been scared with an iron. Angry, scathing words assembled themselves on her tongue and she opened her lips to tell him exactly what she thought of a man who would force his kisses upon a girl.

But then, as he leaned forward, an odd thing happened. All at once her anger and resentment faded away. As

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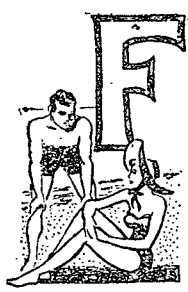
she stared at him in bewilderment she found herself discovering that his eyes weren't plain blue as she had thought. They were flecked with black shadows, and they were staring at her now like twin search lights, waiting for her answer.

Swallowing her prearranged speech she said helplessly, "I guess I understand, Revelry."

"Good girl. And it's friends again?" Her hands were again cradled in his and this time she made no protest. For once more she felt the trap spring, felt her own will power dissolve beneath the inexplicable power that flowed from his big frame. Parrot like she repeated, "Friends it is then."

For a seeming eternity their glances met and held, and Denny saw his eyes brighten with a strangely wistful light. Then without another word he turned, started the car and drove up to the house and honked for Frost.

Chapter Three



FROM THE moment Denny entered the house that afternoon until that night when she finished dressing for dinner, Mrs. Bourne had kept her so busy she hadn't any idea where the time had gone. But now, with all preparations for the party completed, Denny surveyed herself in the full length mirror on her closet door. She was wearing a strapless white satin evening dress. From the hem of its softly flowing skirt the dress tapered sharply to a slim waistline, and circling the bodice were tiny French flowers: forget-me-nots, sweetheart roses, sprigs of delicate fern. Denny wore the only jewels she owned: her Mother's pearls which Aunt Martha had saved for her.

The dress had seemed an extravagance, but Mrs. Walters had deemed it necessary. "You'll need at least one dinner dress," she'd advised shrewdly, when Denny hesitated at its price. But now, away from the dress store in the ornate elegance of Comargo she hoped only that it wouldn't look too plain. With youth's skeptical, uncertain reasoning, she had no way of seeing that the effect of the white satin and pearls against her flawless ivory skin was breath-taking. That she looked very young and desirable, and somehow touchingly vulnerable with her grey eyes shining with expectancy.

When the hall clock struck seven she went downstairs. But if her heart was beating painfully and if her throat was dry from nervousness no one would know by her poised smile.

Revelry's bedroom was open when she passed it but she didn't look in. There hadn't been time all day to try and analyze what had happened to her this morning. But now, as though she were repeating a lesson imperfectly learned, she made another quick, determined resolution: of course she couldn't antagonize the son of her boss but because of the strange, almost frightening helplessness she always experienced in Revelry's presence she would do her best to avoid him whenever possible. Only with the memory of Mark still eating into her heart one would think she'd never have to worry again about any man, she told herself in self condemnation.

But the warmth and color of the rooms on the main floor enveloped her as soon as she started down the steps, and immediately she pushed her worries into the background.

Frost had worked miracles with the flowers Mrs. Bourne had ordered. Bird of Paradise blooms splashed color on the coffee table in the drawing room; the mantle was a bower of white roses; and a last minute inspection of the dining room revealed the long, damask covered banquet table sparkling with sterling and crystal, lit by ivory tapers surrounding a bowl of blood red orchids.

For a moment, in contrast, Denny re-

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membered Comargo as she had first seen it: bleak, rain-swept, forbidding. Then wryly she smiled as she went into the drawing room.

She found four people there. Mrs. Bourne, seated on the couch was a color photograph direct from Vogue with her diamond choker winking in the lamplight. Flame arrived early, looked like an impish child, Denny thought, dressed in a vermillion dress that was as tight fitting as a sheath and revealed far more than if she wore a Bikini swim suit. Her long jet earrings gave her pertly featured face a piquant look, and her auburn hair was piled high on her head, caught up with a carved comb.

Her hands, holding a cocktail glass, reminded Denny of those seen in medieval portraits. Slim, tapering, almost lifeless.

BUT THERE was nothing lifeless about her voice. "I don't care if Grandfather Merriwether was smart enough to settle here and discover oil," she was telling Mrs. Bourne petulantly as Denny came into the room. "I'm tired of this bayou country. What's the use of money if you live in the sticks?"

"But, Flame," Mrs. Bourne protested gently. "You must be proud of your background. Even Boston hasn't any finer old families to boast of than we have here in Louisiana."

"That's the trouble, Mother. You harp too much on stuffiness that doesn't count any more. Nowdays it isn't *who* you are but *what* you can do that matters."

Denny turned at the sound of Revelry's voice, stared at his broad shouldered figure standing beside the piano. Grudgingly she had to admit that he was impressively handsome in his evening clothes. His hair, damp from its recent tussle with tonic and brush, was very blond in the lamplight, and the starched white of his shirt made his skin seem as darkly sunburned as polished mahogany.

He caught a glimpse of Denny as his Mother began, "Nonsense, Revel. One's background *always* matters.....," and whistled loudly in frank, masculine approval.

As the women looked up Denny, in spite of her determination not to, felt her cheeks flood with color, and she bit her lips in vexation as she came forward.

Mrs. Bourne smiled as she introduced Denny to Flame's Mother, a heavy-set woman with snapping green eyes who was sitting alone on the piano bench. But Flame's eyes darkened and her lips thinned to a harsh line when Denny sat down beside her. "I wore a dress like that to my very first kid party," she said lightly, and Denny knew she was mocking her. But the door bell saved her from replying.

A moment later Frost ushered in a stream of guests, and almost at once the room hazed with cigarette smoke, and Maggie began to circle the crowd with a tray of cocktails.

Mrs. Bourne's eyes sparkled as she greeted her guests, and, Denny realized with a shock, it was probably only at times like these that her employer really enjoyed herself.

Denny remained in the background, but her watchful eye kept things running smoothly. She advised Maggie they needed another tray of "dips;" told Frost it would be better if he could manage to open a window or two and freshen the air while they went in to dinner.....

She sat almost at the foot of the table, and Revelry's face was just a brown blur beside the splash of tangerine Flame's frock made beside him. But later when they had finished dining and trooped into the game room where Frost had cleared and waxed the floor and put some new platters on the record player, she found Revelry suddenly beside her, claiming her for a dance. "Come on, Denny, you've worked hard enough for one day. How about having some fun now?" he asked.

Denny saw Mrs. Bourne watching her from across the room and again

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she remembered her warning about her son. "Really, Revelry, I....I can't..." she began firmly, but she might as well have been talking Greek for all he listened. Impervious to her refusal he slipped his arms about her and swung off across the polished floor. Denny loved dancing, and Revelry's incredible lightness, his almost professional sense of timing came as a welcome surprise, and after a while she forgot that she was his Mother's secretary and that this party tonight was actually part of her job, and she gave herself up to the sheer thrill of dancing with him.

SHE WAS breathless when finally he whirled her to an opened window and led her into the garden. The sky was still cloudy and the moon sulky. There was a chill in the air, and, in her thin frock, she suddenly shivered. Revelry immediately slipped his arms about her, pulled her close to him.

"Revelry, please," she began stiffly, but he silenced her with a finger gently pressed upon her lips.

"Don't, Denny. I'm not going to frighten you again. Don't you know that? I wanted only to tell you that we're going to have a treasure hunt in a few minutes. It's a silly affair, driving wildly about the countryside in cars hunting for things, but Mother's pleased as punch for cooking it up herself and springing it as a surprise. That's what those tickets are for she asked you to make out, in case you've been wondering. We'll draw numbers, you know, for partners."

Denny nodded. "I know. It *was* supposed to be a secret but your Mother had to tell me because she needed my help in organizing it."

Revelry grinned. "I'll bet she didn't tell you that I've coerced Frost into fixing the drawing. It's all arranged that I'll get your number. We'll be partners then, okay?"

He lowered his smiling eyes, and Denny caught the masculine scent of cigarettes and shaving lotion. Then an odd dizziness seemed to hit her and somehow her decision to stay clear of Revelry slipped completely from her mind. "All right, if you want it that way," she agreed nervously.

From the lighted dance floor there emerged Flame's bright figure. "Revelry, there you are! I've been looking all over for...." She stopped in midsentence when she saw Denny. "Mrs. Bourne would like to see you, Miss Keith," she told Denny sharply. "She wants you to help Frost with a punch bowl before the hunt."

Denny murmured something and slipped into the house. A moment later she was huddled with Frost in the butler's pantry while they discussed the merits of serving the famous Comargo punch in the hall on a special table, or whether it would be best to simply roll it into the game room on a server after it was iced.

She decided finally on the latter, but when the crystal cups with the Comargo monogram had been handed around filled with the deceptively potent punch, Frost tapped Denny on the shoulder.

"Pardon, Miss," he whispered, "but there's a telephone call for you. You can take it on the extension in the garden room."

Denny looked startled, hoping it was a mistake. No one knew of her presence here but Aunt Martha and Mrs. Walters, and neither would be likely to incur the expense of a long distance call without serious reason.

But when she fearfully picked up the receiver, Mark's once-beloved deep voice answered her:

"Denny! Good heavens, baby, if you aren't turning out to be the illusive sprite! How are you, baby? And when are you coming home?"

Denny's heart stopped like a stalled motor. Mark.....here, where she had thought the past could never touch her.

"I'm fine, Mark," she told him evenly, fighting her shock, the telltale quiv-

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er in her voice. "But I'm not coming back.....not ever. But how did you know where to find me?"

MARK LAUGHED, and for a split second it was almost as if she again stood with him beneath the pines. "Your Aunt wouldn't tell me a thing, so when she went to the movies tonight I slipped into her room, found your last letter to her with your return address. Really very elementary, my dear Watson."

"I see." Denny swallowed to force back the lump strangling her throat. How like Mark to stop at nothing when he wanted something. Funny she had never been aware of his utter selfishness before.

"Denny, quit stalling now. When are you coming back, baby? You can't run out on me like this."

"I'm *not* coming back, Mark, and I don't want to see you again. So don't call me anymore. I've got to go now. Goodbye." She put the receiver back on its hook quickly before her voice betrayed her. For a moment she stood there in the garden room, a slim, tortured figure beside a table heaped with vases and flower holders.

The pain she had fought these past days was back again, sharp and unbearable. She had thought she was past all that now but she was mistaken. Even across the miles Mark could reach out and hurt her.

She smoothed her hair from her pounding temples. This is what happens when a girl is fool enough to let her heart out of her own keeping, she mused bitterly. As she fretfully pounded her doubled fist against the table her eyes hardened. She couldn't help the past, but if she had any brains at all she could watch out for the future. She remembered Revelry's teasing eyes, his warm lips, and she shivered. Maybe Mark's call was just what she had needed!

Slowly her heart began to freeze, and her lips set grimly. Never, never again, she vowed fiercely. But when she turned to go she found Revelry blocking the door, his topcoat and hat in his hand.

"Here you are, Denny. I've been searching everywhere for you. The drawing's over. Frost carried through nobly without even winking at me. I'm your partner, lady, so get your wrap."

As Denny stared at his blond figure she felt her pulse leap. Then angrily she got hold of her emotions. "I'm not going," she announced flatly.

"Not going?" His voice was incredulous.

"No. You go alone. I've...I've got some things to do here."

He was beside her in a minute, his hands tightly gripping her wrist. Dully she stared at them, knowing it would be useless to struggle to free herself.

"No, that's not the reason. You don't lie well enough to attempt it, Denny," he told her bluntly. "I want the truth. What's happened?"

Fretfully she twisted her head away. "Nothing's happened," she evaded. "I just don't want to go, that's all."

"Has Mother been talking to you about me?" His voice was sharp.

"Don't be silly. She hasn't even mentioned your name to me this evening."

"Well, what gives then? You're not..... Great Scott, Denny, you're not *afraid* of me?" he asked with sudden urgency.

"No, I'm not afraid of you, Revelry. I just don't w-a-n-t to go with y-o-u. Can't you understand t-h-a-t?" Denny spoke impatiently, emphasizing her words as if she were trying to convince a small boy of something that seemed beyond his reasoning.

For a long moment Revelry continued to watch her with puzzled eyes. Then gradually his face colored and his jaw set. His pulse beat jerkily in his throat, and his voice was hard when he spoke. "I understand..... *now*. I'm sorry I've been such a square. But I won't bother you again, Denny."

He swung on his heel, stalked swiftly out of the room. For a second Denny had an almost unconquerable desire

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to call him back. Then she shut her lips. From now on she wasn't going to let anyone be in position to hurt her again....

She slipped up the stairs to her room, not bothering to turn on the lights. She heard the departing treasure hunters' cars roar down the drive. Then, after a session of dully staring out at the garden—how long she knew not nor cared—she heard them return, caught their triumphant shouts as they claimed their prizes. Once more music from the game room drifted up the stairs, and cigarette smoke filled the corridor, seeped under the door into her room.

Chapter Four

LATER, AFTER a great banging of doors Denny blinked in the sudden glare of the brilliant searchlights lighting the landing field. Then a plane rose from the field, roared against the sky and was swiftly gone in the night. Within ten minutes Comargo was silent as a dead house. The last guest had departed, and even the servants had finally gone to bed.

Still Denny couldn't sleep, and restlessly she lit a cigarette. Where in the world could Revelry have gone at this hour in his plane? Again and again, in spite of her fighting to forget it, the question came to torment her.

When Mrs. Bourne tapped at her door, she actually jumped from sheer nerves. "It's terrible barging in like this, Miss Keith," the woman apologized, "but I'm half out of my mind. Revelry's taken Flame Merriwether up in his plane and they haven't come back."

Denny moistened her dry lips. "But why in the world would he take Flame up at this hour in this kind of weather?"

"Oh, Revelry protested that the party was breaking up too early. Said he knew of night club in Fenway that he wanted to visit. Then Flame insisted she wanted to go, too. And Revelry, well I've never seen him like that before. He acted almost as if he didn't care whether it was safe to fly there or not." Her voice trembled, and in spite of the make-up she still wore, her flatteringly youthful dressing gown, Denny saw a woman who was old, and who was terribly lonely.

Strangely stirred, she said, "I don't think you need worry, Mrs. Bourne. Revelry probably knows what he is doing. If there were bad news, you'd certainly have heard it by now. They may be staying at the Club later than they had planned. Come, please let me tuck you in bed and try and sleep. As soon as he returns I'll let you know. That is if you're still awake."

She led her employer back to her room, saw that she was warmly established in bed. Then she went out, down the stairs to the hall below.

She huddled on the hall seat and stared dully at the dying fire in the grate. She felt almost as though she had swallowed some medicine which dulled her nerves. But after a long, long time the fire went out, and she got up and lit a lamp. When she glanced at her wrist watch she stiffened as though an icy wind swept her. Five o'clock! Surely something *had* happened. Revelry wasn't fool enough to fly in this wretched weather at this hour just for the sport of it.

Gradually a horrible fear wrapped itself around her like a smothering blanket. *There had been trouble.* Maybe even now Revelry was lying somewhere hurt, in need of help. Trembling she got up just as footsteps raced up the porch.

REVELRY, white faced and grim, wearing a rain soaked leather jacket, strode in the hall. He started when he saw Denny crouched in the

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lamplight. "What in the devil are you doing here at this hour?" he demanded curtly.

The relief she felt at the sight of his tall figure, safe and unharmed, was so great that for the moment Denny thought she would faint. Then with a wild little cry she ran to him, slipped her hands on his shoulders to make certain she wasn't dreaming. "I....I was afraid that there had been trouble..... that you were hurt," she stammered, not realizing what she was doing.

Revelry looked down at her skeptically. "And does my safety mean so much to you that you couldn't sleep?" he asked dryly.

For a moment she twisted his words in her mind as if she couldn't understand what he said. Then slowly, bewilderedly, she backed away from him. No....no, it wasn't true, she told herself fiercely. Mark had taught her the pain that love brings. She *couldn't* be fool enough to fall in love again.

Only she had! The smothering beating of her heart, the fire that burned in her cheeks wouldn't be denied. And the sequence of incidents that had been distressing her ever since she arrived here now slipped into understandable focus: her unconquerable response to his kisses; her helplessness whenever he was near; her unbearable fright tonight when she feared for his safety. All the time she had been brooding about Mark, her heart really belonged to this hawk-eyed blond giant who was now watching her so steadily. But it had taken this time of desperate worry to open her eyes.

Fleetingly she realized that what she had believed to be heartbreak was only hurt pride, and that whatever she had once felt for Mark was like water beside the wine of this searing emotion that burned through her.

"I'm waiting for your answer, Denny?" Revelry's voice was as insistent as a prosecuting attorney.

Dazed, she looked up at him. Then slowly telltale color crimsoned her cheeks. For another eternity he stared deep into her shamed eyes as if he would read her very soul. Then, as she twisted away with a sob, he caught her to him, hard and tight. There wasn't time or need for words. Not with his impatient lips finding hers.

When at last he raised his head he wondered, "Will mere man ever understand women, Denny? When I took off tonight I thought I didn't have a chance with you and I hated everything and everybody. And now, well for no damn reason at all I find you in my arms and I'm actually afraid to believe what your lips are telling me."

Denny couldn't see because her eyes were full of tears. Childishly she sniffed, wiped them away with the big white handkerchief he handed her. Her mind was a mill race of chaotic thoughts and she felt as though she'd suddenly taken off in a space ship to some planet where everything was incredibly wonderful but terribly unreal.

Then she became aware that Revelry was talking, that his mouth was suddenly serious. "But you were right, Denny. There was trouble, engine trouble and I had to make a forced landing. The ship's badly cracked up and Flame's in the hospital." His voice dropped. "I don't believe it's anything serious, just shock and a bad bump. But the doctor's given her a hypo to put her to sleep, and tomorrow he'll give her a thorough check-up."

"But you, Revelry?" Her question was strained.

He nodded reassuringly. "I'm as healthy as I look. Didn't get even a scratch." He slipped his arms about her trembling shoulders and led her to the stairs. "I hate to run out on you as soon as I've really found you, Denny, but I've got to get into some dry clothes and drive over and tell Flame's Mother. Leela's got to know, too. But I'll hurry back because there's a million things we've got to talk about now." As they mounted the stairs his fingers tightened and Denny heard him

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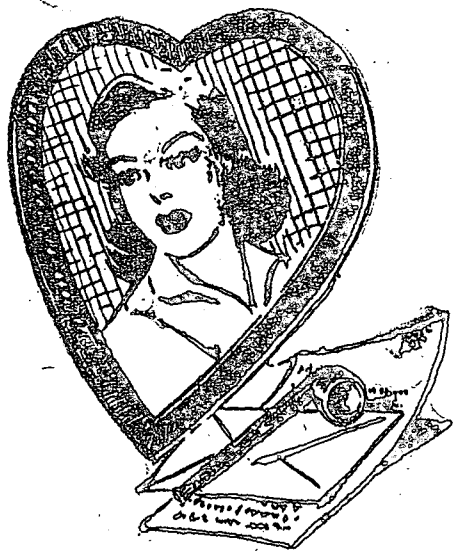

whisper under his breath, "Denny; funny little name for an armful of paradise....."

WHEN DENNY woke the next morning the sun was high in the heavens, painting golden bars on her carpet. The moment she opened her eyes, memory of her new-found love flashed into her mind, and, for a moment, she lay perfectly still, letting the wonder and glory of it steal over her like a veil. Revelry.....Revelry Bourne. She whispered his name, and it was as though she had spoken magic words which destroyed all her doubts, even memory of Mark.

Then someone tapped at her door, and in answer to her call, Maggie came in. "Sorry to disturb you, Miss Keith, but there's a gentleman come to see you. Frost has shown him into the garden room. The rest of the house is at sixes and sevens after the party, you know."

A visitor, here? Maybe Revelry had sent someone from town with a message for her, she reasoned as she jumped out of bed.

Exactly ten minutes later she sprayed a mist of perfume about the hem of her dress, stood back and examined herself in her dressing table mirror. Her short cut brown hair was brushed into a cap of crisp curls and glinted with amber highlights in the morning sunshine. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement and her grey eyes glowed like a child's at the sight of its first Christmas tree. She wore a simple dress of yellow linen with bands of soft green at the throat, and on her slim feet were strapped green sandals.

For a moment she stared at herself in wonder. What could have happened to her? She had never known herself to look like this before. Then she realized it must be her love for Revelry that lit the glowing fire in her eyes, brought the unaccustomed bloom to her cheeks. Trembling, she turned away. If anything happened this time to her happiness she knew she couldn't stand it. But the hum of the vacuum sweeper in the hall steadied her, and pushing back such unsettling thoughts she went down the stairs to the garden room.

There was something familiar about the set of the shoulders of the man she saw standing there, staring out the window, back to the door. At the sound of her footsteps he turned.

"Mark!" Her greeting was a stunned cry, and as he came eagerly toward her she impulsively shut the door as though she would keep his presence from the household.

"What are you doing here?" Her voice was strained, forbidding.

"I've come for you." Mark was frowning, as if angry at himself for being here. "Ever since you went away I can't sleep, I can't relax, I can't even paint any more. When you hung up on me last night I hopped a midnight plane. I had to see you, for I've got to have you back."

Denny couldn't keep the harshness from her voice, and Mark winced when she said, "Aren't you rather mixed up? You can't afford *responsibilities*, remember, Mark?"

"I was a fool when I told you that," he protested as he crossed the tiled floor that separated them, grasped her

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shoulders with urgent fingers. "Denny, without you even painting has no meaning for me. It's you I want more than anything else. I know that now. Say you're not mad at me, baby, that you'll come home with me."

He smiled winningly, tilted her face upward to meet his confident eyes. Denny twisted free of him. "Don't, Mark," she ordered sharply. "Of course I'm not mad at you. But I won't go back with you. I have a job here."

HIS SURPRISE was obvious. Then his eyes narrowed shrewdly. "You didn't know, did you, Denny, that your Aunt must have an operation. She didn't write you because she didn't want to worry you. But I heard her discussing the matter with that new doctor that's boarding at the house. He said it was imperative that she have the job done as quickly as possible."

"Oh, no, Mark. Not Aunt Martha!" Denny looked at him in sudden fright.

He shrugged. "We all get to it sometime, I suppose. But surely you will want to be around when it takes place."

"Of course." Her assurance came quickly, in spite of her shock. She couldn't imagine her Aunt being ill. She had always been so alive, so untiring, and she had never mentioned feeling ill.

"Well then, suppose you make arrangements to leave with me on the afternoon plane? The quicker you get home the better for your Aunt, you know."

"Of course. I'll...I'll see Mrs. Bourne right away." Obediently, like a suddenly frightened school girl, she slipped into the hall just as Mrs. Merriwether hurried inside the house.

"Don't bother to show me in, Frost," she was telling the butler. "I've been visiting this house long enough to know my way around. Ah, good morning, Miss Keith," she interrupted herself to greet Denny. "I wonder, my dear, if you would be good enough to tell Leela I'm here. I've got to complete plans today for the Country Club Harvest dinner next Saturday and as Leela's on the entertainment committee I'll need her advice."

"I don't know whether or not she's up yet," Denny said turning to the stairs, "but I'll see, Mrs. Merriwether. By the way, I heard about the accident; how is your daughter?"

"Ecstatic. Simply ecstatic in spite of this wretched plane smash-up," Mrs. Merriwether beamed.

Denny must have revealed her bewilderment for the older woman caught her hand, pulled her nearer to her. "I'm not supposed to tell," she whispered confidentially, "but Flame and Revelry have just gotten themselves engaged. I suppose the accident did it, but isn't it wonderful? Leela and I have been wanting this for years. They both have the same background and friends; it will be an ideal match. Frankly, my dear, Flame's been a bit of a problem at times and I'm not sorry to see Revel take over now."

"Engaged? Flame and Revelry?" Denny didn't realize how sharp her voice was.

But Mrs. Merriwether was too excited to notice. "Yes. After I learned about the accident I drove to the hospital so frightened I couldn't breathe. But I found Flame apparently all right, only she was terribly nervous and when I left her for a bit while I visited one of our maids who is hospitalized with a broken ankle bone, she actually seemed glad to see me go. But when I returned to her room she was as excited as a kitten with a ball of yarn. She told me right away that she and Revelry had just become engaged. Revelry stood there silently, letting her jabber away, as shy as if he'd never seen me before. About the only thing he managed to get out was to ask me to let him break the news here at Comargo himself."

She sniffed and frankly wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. "I'm thrilled, of course, but how I'm going

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to see Leela this morning without spilling the news I'll never know."

Denny didn't see how she could go on breathing when every shining piece of her new world was tumbling into splinters at her feet. As if she were walking in her sleep she turned toward the stairs, heard herself murmuring, "I'll tell Mrs. Bourne that you are here, Mrs. Merriwether."

MAYBE IT was because Mark was watching the scene from the garden room. Perhaps it was because she didn't have any tears left. She didn't understand really. All Denny knew as she began to climb the stairs was that her breathing was as difficult as if she were attempting to inhale under deep water, but her eyes were dry as sand.

When she tapped at her employer's door, Maggie immediately opened it. Mrs. Bourne was lying on a couch, clutching a heating pad to her swollen arm.

"Mrs. Merriwether is downstairs and wants to see you," Denny said evenly. "And there's something I must tell you immediately: someone has just come from my home to tell me that my Aunt requires an operation at once. I'll have to go to her, of course, and I wondered if you couldn't get someone to take my place?"

Mrs. Bourne winced as she changed her position. "Now, isn't that awful, and just when we were getting along so well, too! Well, of course you must go, my dear, and don't worry; we'll get along until you come back somehow." She turned off the heating pad. "I do hope poor Bertha Merriwether isn't all upset about this wretched plane crash business. I suppose I should have followed doctor's orders and never given that party last night anyway. My arthritis is perfectly unbearable this morning."

She called to Maggie. "Run down stairs, Maggie, and bring Mrs. Merriwether up here. And you'd better start packing, Miss Keith. I'll have Washington drive you to the airport."

Back in her room, Denny wondered just how she would be able to pack when her brain flatly refused to work, when the only thought she had was the knowledge that she was a pitiful, stupid fool. But by concentrating on one article at a time she managed and soon her suitcases stood in a row, strapped and waiting for Frost to take them downstairs.

Then she took one last look about her. She had been so happy here. But it had been only a fool's happiness, for the space of a few, brief hours. And now she'd never see the room again because, of course, she would never return to Comargo. Her one coherent desire was to escape without seeing Revelry, and after she was away she would write Mrs. Bourne telling her she couldn't come back, she thought dully as she started to the door. Then, when she opened it, she shrank back into the room as Revelry stalked in, shut the door behind him.

His eyes started when he saw her suitcases. "Denny, what the devil is the meaning of this?" he demanded sternly.

She made her voice light. "My Aunt is ill. I'm going home to her."

"You mean you were going away without saying goodbye to me?" His voice was incredulous, and as he moved beside her his hands gripped her shoulders tightly, bruising her flesh.

Swiftly she slipped free of him. "What did you want, a wedding present?"

For a moment he watched her not understanding at all. Then his eyes widened in growing comprehension. "How did you know?" he muttered.

"Mrs. Merriwether just came. She said you didn't want her to tell anybody but I suppose she thought I didn't count."

Slowly the blood drained from his face and a queer helplessness shadowed his eyes. Then, as if fighting some secret bond, he held out his hands to her. "Wait, Denny. You musn't jump

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to conclusions this way. You don't understand. Let me explain...."

"Explain?" Denny interrupted him harshly. "What's there to explain? You don't deny that Flame and you became engaged this morning do you?"

He dropped his hands to his sides. "No, I don't deny that," he admitted quietly.

"Well then, what else is there to say?" Denny gathered up her purse and gloves, started for the door.

"Denny, wait! Surely you know I wouldn't hurt you....."

In another moment she would be crying and she would rather die than let him see that. Frantically she took refuge in flippancy. "Oh, don't be such a square, Revelry," she laughed scornfully. "Because we made with the love scene last night is no reason to make such a big deal out of it this morning."

His mouth thinned to a forbidding line. "Don't talk like that, Denny," he commanded sternly.

"Hey, Denny. What's the dope? Are you coming?" A man's impatient voice drifted up the stairs, cut across Revelry's words.

"Who is that?" he asked, startled.

In a moment she would be gone and she'd never see him again. But she wasn't going to leave having him feel sorry for the little air-brained secretary who had fallen too hard for his line. At least she could salvage her pride, Denny assured herself brokenly. She forced a gay smile to her lips, held the huskiness from her voice. "That's Mark Farrow.....the man I'm going to marry."

She didn't trust herself further, and as she darted past Revelry into the hall she fought the tears that fogged her eyes. She sped down the winding stairs to Mark, waiting in the hall below. A moment later Washington followed with her luggage.

Then once again she was seated on the back seat of the limousine only this time she was running *away* from Comargo. But even with Mark beside her, triumphantly holding her icy hand in his, she knew that she was leaving her heart behind her....

Chapter Five

DENNY SAT in her Aunt's kitchen playing with a basket of kittens. It didn't seem possible that it was only seven days since she had returned home she thought. Somehow Revelry, the big house, seemed very far away, almost like a dream. Only the pain in her breast, the odd lifelessness that made all her movements seem stiff and wooden were unbearably real.

As she returned the last kitten to the basket she sighed. I wonder if I'll ever come alive again, she asked herself bleakly when she got up to answer the door.

Mark stalked in, a little dusty and disheveled from a train trip in to New York, but obviously pleased with himself. "Look, Denny. For us, tomorrow night." He reached into his wallet, drew out two theatre tickets. "You said you wanted to see the ballet."

"But not tomorrow night," she protested, startled.

"Why not?"

"Surely, Mark, you can't have forgotten that Aunt Martha is to be operated upon tomorrow."

"I did forget it, worse luck. But what's that got to do with it?"

Denny paled. "Simply that wild horses couldn't drag me from her then. Really, Mark, I can't understand you. You told me yourself at Comargo that it was my place to come home and see her through this crisis."

"Ah, Denny, don't be so gullible. I used that line only to get you to come back with me," he admitted, grinning confidently. "The nurses will take care of your Aunt. What good will your hanging around do?"

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He crossed the room, slipped his arm around her. Mistaking her stunned silence for acquiesence he bent his dark head to hers. "Come on, Denny, why stall any longer? I'm getting tired of the brush off you've been giving me ever since you came back. When are we two going to get married?"

"Never, Mark, never." Shivering with distaste she backed away from him.

"Now wait a minute, baby, I...."

She stopped him. "We're through, Mark. I couldn't marry you for I don't love you anymore. Whatever I thought I felt for you is over. I came back with you only because of Aunt Martha. I want you to leave here right away and not try and see me again. I'm....I'm sorry if I have to hurt you this way." She kept her voice free of the contempt she felt for his utter selfishness. She knew now what it meant to be hurt by someone you loved.

But even so his face flooded an angry red. "So that's it," he sneered. "There's someone else. Maybe that blond guy I saw pop in at Comargo." He laughed harshly. "If you're counting on him to marry you, baby, you don't know the score. A guy in his brackets just doesn't play for keeps."

DENNY DIDN'T answer, but her grey eyes hardened. From some deep inner wisdom she realized that Mark had never really loved her. Didn't love her now. That the only reason he thought he wanted her was because suddenly she had become inaccessible.

He watched her angrily for a long moment. Then he swallowed, half held his arms out to her in a pleading gesture. Denny shook her head. "No, Mark, it's no use," she whispered dropping her eyes to the floor. In a second the door slammed. When she looked up she was alone in the big kitchen, and only the mewing of the kittens broke the silence.

Denny shook herself as though waking from a drugged sleep, looked at the clock and saw it was time she went upstairs and helped her Aunt get ready for her trip to the hospital. As she climbed the stairs she wondered drearily if there might not be some kind of blight upon her. It didn't seem normal that happiness should always be out of her reach.....

ON A SUNNY morning three weeks later, Denny sat in her Aunt's hospital room reading a letter, while her Aunt, dressed in a gay bed jacket and propped up in bed by pillows, idly thumbed through a magazine that had just arrived on the morning's mail along with Denny's letter.

As Aunt Martha leafed through the gardening periodical she suddenly blinked when she turned a page, held the book closer for a more thorough inspection. Then she looked at Denny. "What are you so quiet about?" she demanded thoughtfully.

Denny smiled. "Just glad your operation turned out so successfully."

Her Aunt snorted disdainfully. "There never was any doubt about it. If you hadn't been such a frightened puss you needn't have ever come home."

Denny didn't protest. She understood the limitless love that lay behind her Aunt's grim exterior.

"Who's the letter from?" Aunt Martha could be curious as a kitten, too.

Denny sighed. "It's from Mrs. Bourne. The local girl she has in my place isn't working out. She wants to know when I'll return."

"When will you?"

Startled, Denny bit her lips. "I don't know, maybe I won't go back. I might get something closer to home."

Her Aunt's lips tightened. "There's no reason to stick close to me. I'll be fine as a fiddle soon as I get home." She took off her glasses, rubbed her beaky nose impatiently. "It isn't Mark, is it, Denny?" she demanded abruptly.

Denny shook her head. "No, that's all over. He's gone now."

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Aunt Martha looked relieved. "I'm glad, Denny. When I saw how it was between you two I was scared. Mark isn't really a man yet, and I didn't want you hurt while he grew up. Here, look at this." She tossed the gardening magazine to Denny.

A CAMERA VISIT TO THE FAMOUS GARDENS OF COMARGO AND LAND'S END, NEIGHBORING LOUISIANA ESTATES, Denny read as her eyes slipped over the brightly colored photographs. *Land's End was recently the scene of a brilliant wedding in the rose garden when Flame Merriwether, only daughter of the house, was married beneath a bower of white.....the bride has deserted her family's beautiful old mansion for Paris where her husband has taken a long-term lease on the Minotti villa.....*

As the words swirled in her brain, gradually began to have meaning, Denny felt the last shred of hope she'd been saving vanish. Revelry and Flame were married; no miracle could bring him back now.

Then she was aware that her Aunt was speaking. "Looks like a lovely place, Comargo," she was saying. "Never saw gardens like that in New England. Why don't you go back, Denny. After all Mrs. Bourne is depending upon you. I don't like your letting her down. We Keiths never have been quitters."

Denny stared unseeingly out the window, pressed the magazine against her side to ease the stitch in her heart. Maybe Aunt Martha was right, she thought brokenly. Maybe she should go back. She couldn't stand many more weeks like those she had just passed here, and with Revelry gone from Comargo the job might just be what she needed to stop her from thinking. And she didn't like a quitter any more than her Aunt. "I....I think you're right, Aunt Martha," she decided quietly.....

THAT HAPPENED on a Friday. The following Monday her Aunt was discharged from the hospital, and just a week later Washington met Denny as she stepped off the train at the station nearest Comargo. "Ain't raining this time, Miss," he grinned.

Somehow the ride home seemed shorter, and before she knew it, Denny found herself once again in the paneled hall listening to Frost explain that Mrs. Bourne was at the Country Club supervising their Harvest Dinner, and that she was terribly sorry she couldn't have been home to welcome Denny personally.

When the butler led her upstairs to her old room it was almost like returning to boarding school after a holiday at home. Maggie greeted her enthusiastically, and when cook sent up Denny's dinner, the very attractive tray was added proof of her welcome.

But somehow, after Maggie had cleared away the dinner things, the excitement at her coming dissolved into thin air. She began to feel let down, curiously flat, and underriding this there came an odd kind of unrest, almost a fear.

Even the walls of her room seemed to press down upon her, and shrugging into her jacket she ran out, down the stairs and into the night. As she started briskly down the drive an open

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roadster, its rear seat piled with luggage, roared up. Its headlights blinded her and she stumbled to the side of the road.

The car stopped; a man jumped out, walked across the drive. Struggling to accustom her eyes to the abrupt brightness she blinked. Then all the blood in her body turned to water and her heart began to pound. It wasn't Revelry.....it couldn't be. He was with Flame in Paris. She was just dreaming, she told herself frantically.

But the wind on her cheeks, the gravel beneath her feet assured her this was no dream; this was incredible reality.

"Denny!" Revelry's voice was rough with disbelief, and his eyes blazed with a wild fire. "Tell me, what does this mean?"

Hysterically she cleared her throat. "I've....I've come back to work for your Mother."

"Then you aren't married?" His mouth was taut as he waited for her answer.

She shook her head. She was done with pretending; she didn't even care about pride anymore. "No, that's all over. It was a mistake...."

There must be some sane explanation for his presence here, she thought helplessly, only whatever it was it didn't make any difference. She was trapped as neatly as if the Gods had purposely planned it, and she could almost hear them chuckling in the distance.

Dully she looked up. Then she started back in actual fear for Revelry was closing in on her with outstretched arms.

"Revelry, don't. Please, Revelry, you must be mad....." Her protest came too late for he folded her to him and his arms were like steel bands. Deliberately he caught up her chin in the cupped palm of his free hand, forced it upward to meet his lowered head. Then his mouth came down on hers.

Weakly she clung to him, while the world went into a spin. After a moment she didn't care; she was in his arms again, how or why didn't matter. Nothing was important but his lips against hers.

But when at last he raised his head and stared down at her he said gently, "Don't cry, Denny. Everything's all right now."

Her lips trembled as she childishly brushed the tears from her cheeks. "Revelry, you have no right! You're mad. What about Flame," she stammered fearfully.

"FLAME'S married, gone to live with her husband in Paris." Laughing gently at the stunned shadow that darkened her eyes he lifted her high in his arms, carried her inside his car. "Maybe it will be easier to understand if I start at the beginning, Denny," he said eagerly. "You see, that morning when I went back to the hospital I found Flame hysterical. She was in considerable pain and all of a sudden she couldn't move her legs. X-rays showed grave injury to her spine; the local doctor was afraid she might not walk again. She blamed me for everything. I was so stunned I couldn't think straight. But even so I knew there was nothing I could do but assure her I'd always stand by her. I was responsible; the accident *had* happened in *my* plane, and of course I knew Flame had always had a childish yen for me. When her Mother came, Flame told her of our engagement right away. But she didn't tell her about being paralyzed. Her Mother's heart is very weak; Flame thought she wouldn't stand the shock without proper preparation."

He sighed in remembrance. "That, I thought, was the end of my own particular world, Denny. You see, in spite of Dad's money, I'd never been really happy. Mother took me to see the ballet when I was twelve. I knew then that I wanted to be a dancer more than anything in the world. But Dad

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wouldn't hear of it. The Bournes have always been bankers, important men in the world of finance; I must follow their footsteps. He bundled me off to a private school in Switzerland. After that there was college, then the big show in Korea....."

"Were you hurt?" Denny interrupted anxiously.

Revelry smiled reassuringly. "Just a leg injury. Hardly noticable now. But while I was gone Dad died. When I was discharged and returned home I found Mother suffering from arthritis, missing Dad terribly and calmly counting on me to step into his shoes and manage all her affairs. More than ever then I realized what I had missed. I hated the long hours at the bank, the set social life that meant so much to Mother, that she missed so terribly now that she wasn't well enough to enjoy it full swing. And kid-like I began to rebel. I did foolish reckless things; drank more than was good for me."

He picked up Denny's hand, rubbed it in little boy fashion against his cheek. "And then you came along, sweetheart, and life had meaning again, and on a sudden I regretted the way I'd been living. When I found you waiting for me that night, frightened and cold, I knew at last what real happiness could be. But....."

He stopped, as if even the memory of that moment hurt. Denny blinked back her tears. "And I wouldn't even let you explain," she whispered, remembering.

"No, but under the circumstances I didn't blame you. I had hoped if I could tell you first I could make you understand. But Bertha Merriwether spoiled that. After you'd gone I heard of a famous French bone doctor lecturing in New Orleans; got him to look at Flame. He decided on surgery and the operation was a success. The day Flame walked across her hospital room she told me she couldn't marry me. That she had fallen in love with her doctor and that they were to be married right away and were going to Paris to live."

He shook his head as if still bewildered by it all. "It was like the happy ending of a book, Denny, with Flame more radiant than I had ever seen her, coming down the garden path in her white wedding dress. Happy for everyone but me, because I thought my release had come too late. That you would have found happiness with someone else. And of course, Mother, was disappointed too. She had always wanted me to marry Flame. She said that we'd make a perfect match. She even tried to steer anyone who seemed interested away from me. It was..... well, uncomfortable at times."

He ran his fingers through his hair impatiently. "But Flame's near tragedy opened Mother's eyes, I think. She sees things differently now. Realizes life is too short, too uncertain to value trivial standards. But I couldn't stand Comargo any more. I went on a deep sea fishing trip to Corpus Christi. I returned only tonight to find you walking down the drive to me...."

There was silence for the moment as they looked into each other's eyes. Then, like the lifting of a great weight, Denny's heart began to soar upward. And her world seemed filled with stardust. "Oh, Revelry," she murmured brokenly in final comprehension, "I'll never run away again."

He took her into his arms.

THE END

An Exciting Novelet by Sally Thornton
"BACHELORS ARE VULNERABLE"
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He Lied To Win Her Heart

Chris had heard of love at first sight. Now she knew it could happen.

by Vera Mann

Chris squinted at her profile. Then he nodded: "Wonderful", he said. "You're just the model I've been waiting for!"

CHRIS HARPER never quite knew what impulse made him climb the long stairs to this exclusive art gallery. Though later he blamed it on destiny, for it was here that he first met Sally Marshall.

Chris simply wasn't the art gallery type. Oh, he was civilized enough, and well-educated enough, but to him a picture was something that looked nice hanging on a wall, and that was that.

But he was on the loose during this period of waiting for a new civil engineering job. He'd seen enough movies to do him for a couple of years. He'd

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inspected San Francisco's colorful Chinatown from stem to stern. He'd had a cocktail at the Top o' the Mark, and a couple of dinners at Fisherman's Wharf, and had even gone to an opera the previous evening. He'd skimmed the cream off the town's amusements. So today he was just roaming, in a restless sort of fashion.

And he wound up in the Whitman Art Gallery. It was a big, long room lined with pictures, and Chris strolled along casually, looking at this one and that one. Then suddenly he stopped short and just plain stared.

It wasn't a picture he was staring at, it was a girl. She had red hair, blue eyes, and a figure to stop traffic. Chris felt like whistling, but he was the shy type, and besides an art gallery was no place for that sort of thing, anyway.

She was with another girl, but Chris noticed merely that her friend was short and blonde. All his attention was for the luscious redhead.

She was wonderful. He had to meet her. But how? Chris had never picked up a girl in his life, and something told him that an art gallery wasn't the place to start in.

The two girls stopped now in front of a striking portrait of a lovely dark woman. Chris could hear the redhead sigh, even though he was several feet away from her. Then she said, "Oh, Doris, wouldn't it be wonderful to model for something like this? Imagine being the inspiration for a masterpiece!"

Her blonde friend said in a matter of fact voice, "Not for me, Sally. They say modeling is one of the toughest jobs in the world. I'd rather pound a typewriter any day."

Chris didn't wait to hear any more. He had a sudden, mad idea!

He walked over to the two girls and touched the one called Sally on the arm. Surprisedly, she turned to face him. Chris said quickly, before he could lose his nerve, "I beg your pardon, but would you mind turning your head to one side, so I can get a good look at your profile?"

She stared at him with wide blue eyes, hesitated, then obeyed. Chris squinted at her lovely profile in a knowledgeable way. Then he nodded. "Wonderful!" he said. "You're just the model I've been looking for."

After a moment's pause to let that sink in, he went on, "Would you be willing to pose for me?"

The blue eyes lit up excitedly. "You're an artist?"

He nodded again. "I'm Chris Harper," he said, as though she should recognize the name, "and I live at the Fontaine Apartments, on Post Street. Would you be able to start posing for me next Monday evening, say?"

This was Saturday afternoon. If she agreed to Monday, it would give him a couple of days to bone up on how an artist was supposed to act. But Chris didn't think about that consciously. Right now, he was acting purely on instinct.

She said slowly, "I've got a date..." Then decision compressed her beautiful red mouth. She continued firmly, "I'll break it. I can go dancing any night, but this is the first time an artist ever asked me to pose for him."

But just then the little blonde girl, Doris, drew her friend aside. She started talking in a very low voice. Most of what she said was inaudible, but Chris caught a phrase here and there: "Could be a wolf—better check up on him—dangerous to go to a strange man's apartment—"

Chris could have, with a perfectly clear conscience, strangled the girl named Doris. Instead, he decided to nip her in the bud. When the girls turned back to him, he said pleasantly, "Why don't you bring your little friend with you when you come to pose for me? It might interest her to see how an artist works."

His words had the effect of immediately allaying any suspicions that had started to dawn in Sally's mind, he could tell that. She smiled relievedly, and stared at Doris in an accusing

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manner, as if to say, "See how wrong you were?"

Doris looked rather grudgingly convinced, too. She said, half-sulkily, "I've got a date Monday night, too. And *I* don't want to break mine. Maybe I'll drop in with Sally later on in the posing. It takes a while to paint a picture, doesn't it?"

"It sure does!" Chris said promptly. He didn't add, as he felt like doing, that this particular portrait would take months, if he could manage it. Chris forgot, for the moment, that he was only in San Francisco for a few weeks, pending a new job.

Sally chatted with him a little while longer, then left the art gallery with Doris, promising to be at his apartment at seven o'clock the following Monday evening.

AFTER THAT, a cold and frightened sanity descended upon Chris. What in blazes had gotten into him, to tell a girl he'd paint her portrait? Chris could draw a straight line, with the aid of a ruler, and that did it. He muttered to himself, "I must have suddenly gone nuts. There's no other explanation for it."

He hurried from the gallery, and into the first bar he saw, which wasn't far off. After two brandies, he felt better. He could carry this off okay. He'd spend the rest of today and all of tomorrow studying books about art and artists. He'd go right now and buy a whole mess of them. And whatever supplies an artist used in his profession.

Chris had a dogged determination that enabled him to follow through on anything he set out to do. By Monday, he knew the beginning principles of the painter's profession. He was sure he could flourish palette and brush gracefully enough to deceive Sally.

But of course what went on the canvas itself was another matter. If she ever got a look at what he was painting, she'd know he wasn't an artist.

Chris frowned over that, and finally got an inspiration. He'd tell her he never allowed anyone to look at a painting while he was working on it, not even the model. And Chris beamed happily. His brain was really working on all six these days!

Monday night arrived, and Sally rang the bell of Chris' apartment promptly at seven. She was wearing a green suit and a little green hat and looked even more beautiful than ever.

Chris had fixed up the livingroom of the little apartment to look like an artist's studio. Chris hoped that the friend who was letting him use this apartment wouldn't mind a possible few paint-spots on the carpet. But the friend, Deck Little, seldom was home long enough to notice anything, being a busy traveling salesman.

Sally took off her hat, and laid it on top of the radio cabinet. She stared appreciatively at the canvas waiting blankly on its easel, the palette and brushes, and the other clever touches Chris had added to the room to make his claim to being a painter seem authentic.

Then she sighed happily. "My, this is exciting!" she said.

She looked Chris over with almost reverent eyes. Chris knew that the awe in her expression was due to the fact that she thought him an artist, and hoped that his black hair seemed long enough and that his gray eyes looked temperamental enough to carry out the illusion. Probably a lot of artists were six-feet-three, too, and had muscles to match.

He pointed toward a chair directly opposite the easel. 'Sit there," he said.

The light from bridge lamp brought out the fire in her bronze hair, the warm ivory tones of her skin. Chris had all he could do to keep from walking over to Sally, pulling her to her feet, and kissing her dizzy.

Instead, he carefully told her to fold her hands in her lap, keep her head at a certain angle, and smile dreamily. All of which she did, very carefully.

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FOR HALF an hour, he dabbed paint at his canvas. He got the shape of her face down, after a rough fashion, but the color of her hair somehow came out bright pink, and that rattled him so much that he inadvertently painted her mouth green.

That did it. Quickly, Chris put aside brushes and palette, and draped a cover over the canvas. He said to Sally, "You can relax now. That'll be all for tonight. My—my inspired mood has come to an end."

She stared at the covered easel disappointedly. "Can't I look at what you've done?" she asked in a wistful voice.

Chris practically shuddered. "Look at unfinished work? My dear, I never show anybody one of my pictures until it's completed."

"Oh." She still had a disappointed look in her eyes. She got to her feet. "I guess I'll be going, then."

Chris smiled at her. "We've done a good job tonight, both of us. I think we deserve some relaxation, don't you? After all, I stole you away from a date. Would you like to go out dancing with me, to make up for it?"

She brightened. "Why, yes I would."

Chris had done a very good job of exploring San Francisco recently, and he knew just the night club that would intrigue Sally. It was a smoky, rather sinister-appearing place in a Bohemian section of town, and full of artistic-looking people.

He was right. Sally loved the club. She stared around her in happy excitement. "Goodness!" she exclaimed. "I feel like a character out of 'La Boheme'!"

The wine was good, and the spaghetti even better. The three-piece orchestra definitely knew its music. And Sally could dance—oh, how she could dance! She was light as a feather in Chris' arms.

By the end of the evening, he was even crazier about her than before. Chris had heard of love at first sight. Now he knew it could happen.

Before he left Sally that night, he arranged that she should come to his "studio" the following evening, to pose again. But when he got back to his apartment after delivering Sally to her home in the Mission district, Chris lifted the cover from his painting and shuddered at what looked back at him from the canvas. He thought, "If Sally ever sees the kind of mess that my brand of artistry makes of her beautiful face, she'll never speak to me again. Never!"

FROM THEN on, Sally posed for Chris every evening. She was terribly thrilled about the whole thing, and told Chris that her family and the whole neighborhood were interested in the fact that she was getting her picture painted by a real artist.

Chris groaned inwardly. He felt like a cheat, getting Sally and her family and friends all excited about a picture that would make them run screaming if they ever saw it.

Chris had thrown away his first effort, and started a new canvas. On this one, he was going very slowly and carefully, but since he knew nothing at all about painting, really, the result looked pretty sad.

Two weeks passed. Chris was by turns happy and miserable. Happy because he was with Sally so much, and she seemed to enjoy his company. He generally took her dancing somewhere after she had posed for him for a while, and they had fun together. But he was miserable when he thought of how she'd hate him if she ever found out the way he was deceiving her.

And he wasn't going to be in San Francisco long. He had the assignment for that new bridge in Mexico just about nailed down. So he must work fast.

Only he didn't know just how to work. Chris thought up and discarded what seemed like a thousand plans to get Sally to marry him before he left the States again. All of them seemed either too weak or too fantastic.

Then the thing he wanted came about in the simplest way possible.

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Taking Sally home one night, Chris got out of the cab with her, as usual, and escorted her up to her front door —also as usual.

There was a moon overhead. Somewhat dim with fog, but still...a moon. Chris looked up at it, then down at Sally. And suddenly he had her in his arms, he didn't quite know how, and a kiss was making magic between them.

Chris lifted his head. He breathed, "Oh, Sally, I'm so doggone crazy about you!"

She was trembling a little, he could feel it. A sweet trembling. Her smile was soft, and her eyes were shy as she looked up at him. She stammered, "And I'm c-crazy about you, too, Chris."

Then, like something frightened and wild, she whirled out of his arms, got her key out of her bag with incredible swiftness, and was inside the house.

But he would see her the next evening. She was supposed to come to his apartment to pose, as usual. Chris smiled dreamily as he went down the steps again.

THOUGH Chris had formed the habit of taking Sally home in a cab when an evening together ended, he never called for her. This was because he did not want to meet her family. It would have embarrassed him too much to have to answer their questions about the picture he was supposed to be painting of Sally. They retired early, and by the time he took Sally home, her mother and father were already in bed.

So next night Chris waited in his apartment for Sally. He still had that dreamy smile on his lips. And he had a plan all laid out—a good plan this time.

He would ask Sally to marry him, and he was sure she would consent. Hadn't she said she was crazy about him? Then he would say after this sitting, that the picture was finished, but before showing it to anyone else, he wanted an art critic friend to pass on it. After a couple of days he'd tell Sally, in a dejected fashion, that the friend had said it was a poor effort, and that his artistic talent seemed giving out. Chris would go on to say that painting was really just a sideline with him, anyway, something he did between engineering jobs, and that from now on he was going to concentrate on engineering. He'd tell Sally, further, that he had destroyed his picture of her because only the peak of his talent could do her justice.

Then he and Sally would get married, and go off to Mexico together. Chris sighed happily. Yes, things had worked out beautifully, in spite of the snarl he'd gotten them into.

His doorbell rang. Chris' gray eyes brightened happily. That would be Sally.

It was Sally. But she wasn't alone. With her was the blonde girl, Doris, who'd been with her that day in the art gallery, and, also, a tall, dark, spectacled, and solemn-looking young man.

Sally gave him rather a helpless look. He guessed that she hadn't wanted to bring anybody with her. She said quickly, "You remember Doris Henley, don't you, Chris? And this is Peter Higgins. He's—"

Doris broke in, "Peter works with Sally and me at the insurance office. But he's not really a salesman at heart, he's the artistic type...knows all these modern trends in painting and such. I decided to come watch Sally pose, and when I told Peter what I was doing, he was crazy to come along, too." She sighed in a satisfied manner.

Chris felt distinctly nervous. Peter Higgins was looking at the covered canvas just a little too interestedly. Chris said quickly, "Say, why don't we all go out and do the town together? I'm not in the mood to paint tonight." Even to himself, he sounded unconvincing. He wasn't putting over his point at all. The Higgins fellow was edging closer to the picture. It

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was art he was interested in, not night-clubbing.

Firmly, Chris took Peter's arm. He said, "Come on out in the kitchen, pal, and help me mix some drinks. After we've all had a cocktail or two, maybe you can watch me paint. I'll probably feel up to it by then."

HE DIDN'T feel safe until Peter was in the kitchen, helping him with the drinks. Then, to keep Peter's hands busy, he gave him the tray with the four glasses on it, and led the way back to the other room. He got there just in time to see Doris lifting the cover from his picture.

Sally was sitting in the chair where she always sat to pose. Doris' move was evidently without Sally's consent, for she began sharply, "Doris, I told you Chris doesn't want—"

Doris interrupted. She said, very simply, "For Pete's sake!" She was staring at the picture incredulously.

Sally couldn't see the picture, of course, because the back of it was toward her. But Chris and Peter got a very good view. Chris simply froze to the floor. This was it. Now everything was ruined. Sally would just up and walk out of his life.

Peter se' down the glass he was holding on a small table. Then he walked toward the picture. Chris closed his eyes. Then he opened them again, wide, as Peter said in a deep, approving voice, "Interesting! Wonderful symbolic technique. I certainly like this, Harper."

Chris gulped. Doris turned and looked at Peter as incredulously as she had looked at the picture. But she didn't say anything more. Chris was grateful for that.

Peter continued in an excited tone, "Sally, you'll be famous in artistic circles. The model who was the basis for a picture like this—no wonder you've been thrilled at posing for Harper!"

Sally's face lit up. She turned her blue eyes toward Chris. Then she said, "I'm sorry they looked at your picture, Chris. But now that they have—may I look, too?"

Chris hesitated. The picture still looked horrible to him. But Peter Higgins seemed to know art. Evidently he, Chris, had done something artistically wonderful without knowing it. He said, his voice softening, "Of course, Sally."

She got up and hurried across the room. When she saw the picture, her eyes widened, and a strange look came over her face. But just then, Peter Higgins started to rave about Chris' painting again. Sally looked uncertainly from Peter to the picture. Then she smiled. "It—it's a little different fron what I expected. But Peter knows more about these things than I do. I...I guess it is wonderful."

Chris was infinitely relieved. He smiled, too. Then he said expansively, "I'm so pleased you all approve." He paused a moment, then went on, "Let's go out to a night-club and celebrate. I'm very keyed up, I really couldn't paint tonight."

They all agreed. Chris took them to the smoky Bohemian place where he'd first taken Sally. Peter raved about the atmosphere, and Doris seemed thrilled, too. But Sally was oddly quiet. Chris wasn't worried about her quietness, though. He was too relieved that everybody had liked his picture. It was the last thing he had expected!

They left the night-club at eleven-thirty. Then the two couples separated, and Peter and Doris went off in a cab by themselves, while Chris hailed one for himself and Sally. On the way home, Sally was still quiet.

WHEN THEY got to Sally's place, Chris walked up on the porch with her, as usual. He was feeling strong and sure. He took Sally's hands gently and said, "Sally, I do love you so. Will you marry me?"

Her expression was odd. She looked down for a moment, then looked up at him in a serious way. She said, "I couldn't, Chris."

He stiffened. This was the last thing

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he had expected. He said blankly, "Why not? You told me last night you were crazy about me."

She was silent, frowning. Then she murmured, "It's hard to explain. I—you think differently from me, Chris. You see, I know your painting is wonderful, because Peter says it is. But personally I thought it looked like a bad cartoon! And how could I marry a man whose genius I didn't understand or respect? It would never work out." Firmly, she freed her hands, and turned toward the door.

But he caught her arm and turned her back. Chris' head was whirling with bewilderment. Then, suddenly, he knew what to say. In a rush, the truth poured out—that he'd just pretended to be a painter in order to make her acquaintance. That Peter's liking of his picture had surprised him terribly.

When he got through, she was very still. Then, suddenly, her eyes began to burn. "So it was just a joke," she said between her teeth. "A. . . a follow-through for a pick-up, really!"

Chris was appalled. He hadn't expected this reaction. He began, "But, Sally, I—"

Crack! The slap sounded very loud in the quiet night. Then Sally burst into tears. She cried, "I hate you. I never want to see you again! Here I was, being thrilled at posing for a real artist, telling everyone about it. And all the time, you were laughing at me for being stupid enough to believe in your stupid trick!"

He tried to soothe her, but she wouldn't listen. She unlocked the door, opened it, and almost ran inside, closing the door in his face.

Chris felt terrible. He'd lost everything. And just when he'd thought that his hoax had had a happy ending, after all. Slowly, his shoulders drooping, he went back to the waiting cab.

TWO DAYS passed. Chris grew more miserable with each hour that went by. Receiving the news that he'd gotten the job in Mexico, and would be expected to start in about three weeks, didn't do anything to cheer him up. Now he'd have only a couple more weeks in San Francisco.

Two more days. Then one more. At last, Chris got up his nerve and called Sally at her home early one evening. But when she heard his voice, she hung up immediately. That depressed him more than ever. He left the apartment, and started just walking about the streets.

He wound up in that Bohemian place where he had taken Sally a couple of times. The artistic atmosphere added to his gloom. Chris wanted to die.

He had two brandies, but even that didn't make him feel any better. Then suddenly a hand touched his arm, and Chris turned to look into the lean dark face of a very young man with serious brown eyes and thick, curly black hair. The young man smiled, then nodded at the sketchbook and pencil he held. "Draw your picture?" he said.

Chris recognized him as an artist who went from table to table, drawing the people in the night-club, and selling them drawings. Suddenly an inspiration hit him. He caught the young man by the arm. "Can you paint?" he said. "That is, could you paint a beautiful girl so she'd look as beautiful as she really is?"

The young man looked astonished for a moment, then he grinned. "Sure. I work in oils, too."

Chris stood up, still gripping the artist's arm firmly. "Come on," he said.

He hailed a cab, and gave the address of Sally's home. When they got there, he went to the door with the young artist, whose name, Chris had learned, was Tony Fenelli. Chris rang the bell.

It was Sally who answered! She turned pale when she saw Chris; then her face got red with anger! She said, "I thought I told you I never wanted to see you again, Chris Harper!"

Chris wasn't feeling the brandy now,

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though it had really given him this idea. He felt very sober—and terribly sad. He said, low, "Sally, you wanted your picture painted by a real artist. Well, this fellow is an artist, and I've hired him to paint your picture. Now what you've told your family and friends can be made to come true—and not with a portrait that looks like a cartoon, either."

He set his mouth. There was a hard, hurting place somewhere inside him, but after a moment, he managed a smile. He went on, "I'm leaving for Mexico, to build a bridge, Sally. But before I left, I wanted to make things right with you. I know there's no chance of your marrying me, now. I just—wanted to make a dream of yours come true."

His control was breaking. In a moment, he'd be begging her to take him back. Chris turned, ran swiftly down the steps, opened the door of the cab, and got in. He leaned forward to give the driver the address of his apartment-house, but he was interrupted. A voice called, "Chris! Chris!" And then Sally was running toward the cab.

She jerked the door of it open, and got in, too. She flung herself into his arms. She was sobbing. "Oh, Chris, you were so terribly sweet, just wanting to make my dream come true. Now I know you do love me. And I love you too, so much, so much!"

He couldn't believe it. But he took her in his arms, anyway, in a sort of reflex movement. Her lips tasted of tears, but the kiss was sweeter for that. Chris laid his cheek against her soft red hair, and let heaven enter his heart.

Then two voices came, at almost the same moment. One said, "Where do you want me to take you, mister?" The other said, "When do I start painting her?"

Tony Fenelli was standing on the sidewalk beside the cab. The driver had turned around and was staring at them questioningly. It was they who had spoken.

Chris grinned at them over Sally's contented red head. He said to the driver, "We'll be getting out in a few minutes. I have to tell her family I'm marrying this girl." Then he said to Tony Fenelli, "If you can paint fast, kid, you can paint her in her wedding-dress, before we leave for Mexico!"

Then he forgot there was anybody else around, and kissed Sally again. Kissed her and kissed her, to make up for the days when he'd thought her gone from his life forever.

THE END

Here's A Gripping
Feature Novelet by
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THE TEASER
plus
MAKE-BELIEVE LOVE
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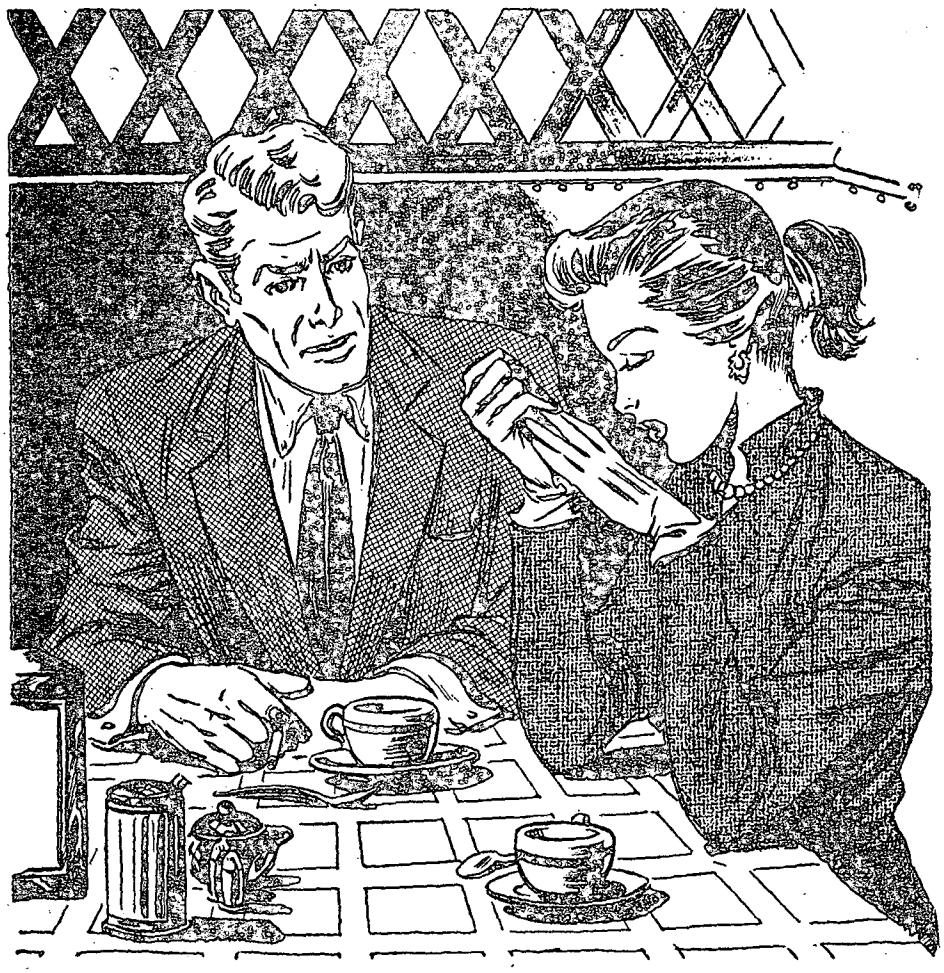
Wedding Postponed

by Doris Knight



He said stiffly, "If you were married to me, you'd have a right to tell me where to date, and with whom. But since we're getting married sometime next century, I'm dating anyone I doggone please!"

PENNY STOLE a side glance at Van, sitting across the table from her at their favorite Village restaurant. She sighed. Yes. Definitely, Van had that familiar gleam in his eyes!

Almost as the thought flitted across her mind, Van said, leaning forward to touch her fingertips with the palm of his hand, "How about setting that

Penny accused Van, "Men always blame the girl they love when they want an excuse to flirt with another girl."

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important date, Angel? Christmas has come and gone, so you can't be a Christmas bride. If you hurry, though, we might get married by June."

Penny thought, "If only I didn't love Van so much! It would be easier. But I've just got to stick to my principles! Money definitely is the root of all evil, when it comes to marriages."

Aloud she said, "Darling, we're having such a beautiful time! Can't we sort of let this discussion go, for tonight? Please, dear. Let's not fuss about anything tonight. Let's just be happy together."

Van drew his hand away with an impatient gesture, and Penny's fingers felt forlorn.

He told her in a stiff tone, "I'm afraid, Penny, we do have to—fuss, as you put it. You see, I happen to be very much in love with you. I've asked you to be my wife. You're wearing my engagement ring. But that's as far as we seem to get. And I'm getting dog-goned sick of this situation. Penny, I'm asking you for the last time to set the wedding date!"

She thought, "He *is* angry, this time! How blue his eyes are and how black the centers. He's good looking and he's dynamic and exciting. No wonder I'm in love with him."

She said something of the sort aloud, and he looked at her coldly. "You may be in love with me, but not enough to say you'll marry me, soon."

She pleated the corner of the red-and-white tablecloth with nervous fingers. "Darling, I've explained over and over. When I was little, my folks fought all the time, about money. Finally they split up. I don't want that to happen to us. I want our marriage to be built on a firm foundation."

She opened her large handbag and took out a silly china cat with its mouth wide open. "Which reminds me, darling," she said firmly. "Feed the kitty!"

Around the china cat's neck was a tag on which Van had printed in large scraggly letter, THE GETTING MARRIED FUND."

Van looked at her very grimly. He took a fat envelope from his pocket and stuffed the envelope into the cat's gaping jaws. Penny pushed a spring underneath the china cat and the jaws shut with a determined snap.

Van looked at the cat with disfavor. "You sure put marriage on a commercial basis, Penny. I don't think I go for the idea!"

She thought, "Oh, dear! He is being terribly difficult tonight."

Luckily, Luigi came along just then. Luigi was their waiter. He was a Latin, with a large waist line, at least three chins, and a pair of big, soulful dark eyes. He was a very sentimental waiter and he adored Penny and Van because they were in love.

"The spumoni she is grand tonight," he smiled at them, kissing his fat fingertips. "You eat good? Everything OK?"

They assured him that everything had been perfect. He lingered to say, "My little kid she win medal at school for doing lessons good. Nice, eh? Mebbe, some day, *you* have smart kid what wins medals at school!"

Van said bitterly, "By the time we get married, we'll be too old to have any kids."

PENNY GOT mad. When Penny got mad she looked very pretty. Her brown eyes flashed amber fires. Her nose went up arrogantly. Her cheeks blazed crimson.

She snapped, "Oh, stop it, Van! Don't turn into a nagger, whatever you do! We talked this all over, long ago. We decided it would be silly to get married, till we could afford a nice place to live."

Out of the corners of her eyes, she saw Luigi slide away, his dark eyes looking troubled. She thought, "When two people fight, it isn't just the two of them who are affected. The quarrel spreads a sort of miasma over everybody they meet!"

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She was ashamed of fighting but something within her that thought she was right, pushed her into saying worse things.

"I want to quit work and be a full-time wife. I don't see why you have to make an issue of this, now, Van. We had it all settled, long ago!"

Van looked at her and his glance was distinctly appraising. "Maybe you conversationed me into thinking you were right, for a while, Penny," he said slowly. "Now, I'm very sure you weren't right. If you don't see why a man should be crazy about waiting years for his bride, then maybe we've made a mistake about the whole thing."

Penny got cold, clear to her toes and she felt a sort of gone sensation in her middle as if she hadn't eaten for a long time. She gasped, "Oh, please, darling, don't ever say such a thing as that, again!"

Van got up. He said, "I don't think I care for spumoni no matter how super-special Luigi says it is. You stay and eat both portions, Penny. Because of course it's been paid for. And we are far more interested in the game of saving money than in wedding bells!"

He tossed a half dollar on the table for Luigi. He scrambled up the bill in fingers that Penny couldn't help seeing, trembled a little. He went off, leaving Penny, sitting at the table.

Pride held Penny motionless. Van was being utterly childish and unreasonable. She must not give in to him.

Luigi came along, his face creased in lines of anguish. "Why he go?" he demanded. He set down the two portions of ice cream in their fluted-paper cups. He looked at her and his eyes cried for her.

She tried to smile. "It wasn't your nice dinner, Papa Luigi," she consoled him, her throat tight with anguish. "We—we just had a fight. It'll be all right. We'll make up."

Her voice didn't sound very certain, she decided, which terrified her.

Papa Luigi bit his lips. "Mebbe you have fight, because you don't get married. You better do like us. Mamma and me we take a chance. We ain't got much money. But we get married anyhow and look how happy we turn out." He added in a practical tone, "And look how good we do, running restaurant together, too. When two people like each other plenty, then they do good in business. You'll see!"

Penny tried to eat the spumoni. The ice-cream stuck in her throat. She was afraid she wouldn't be able to go on breathing. There was a constriction at the back of her throat. She felt as if everybody in the entire cafe was watching her.

She said in a choked voice, "I—I guess I'd better be going, Luigi. I—everything will be all right. Don't worry about us."

She fled headlong out of the cafe which had been such a happy haven for lovers' meetings and which now suddenly looked rather drab and shabby to her and like a Christmas tree thrown in a gutter.

"But I *am* right," she told herself firmly, as she hurried along 8th Street and the bus stop. "It *is* wrong to marry when you haven't enough money and have to scrape along on nothing!"

Somehow, Penny couldn't bear to go back to her apartment to be jibed at by her miserable thoughts. She thought, "I haven't been to see Nick and Cara for ages. I know they'd be glad to see me."

ON IMPULSE she went into the drugstore and rang Cara. Cara's tone warmed and deepened with affection. "You're just in time for Kitten's birthday party. Do come. We'd adore having you."

So Penny went.

Penny and Cara had been file clerks in the same office. Then they'd both taken jobs in another office together. They had been best friends. Till Cara had fallen madly in love with Nick York and had married him after a two weeks' whirlwind courtship.

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Cara went gladly and happily to live in a small, top-floor cold-water flat, which was sparsely furnished and decidedly uncomfortable. Within the year, they had a baby. Cara had no new clothes, nor was there money for face creams nor smart hairdos. The baby was sickly and cried a lot. Nick and Cara quarreled, practically nonstop. And Penny had stopped going to see them.

Cara was the second reason, Penny was determined not to marry before they could have a nice place to live.

She rang the bell, and the downstairs door clicked, invitingly. Penny opened it and began climbing the practically endless flights of stairs. Cara leaned over the bannisters from the floor above when she'd reached the third flight.

"Penny!" she cried happily. "This is *so* wonderful! Hurry up and let me look at you. We haven't seen each other for ages!"

When she came breathlessly into the flat, Penny was surprised to see that the place looked quite homelike. Gay chintzes were hung at the windows and covered sagging couches and chairs. Cara looked pretty, too, with her hair done becomingly, and a gay housedress zippered to her chin. Nick beamed a welcome. Both kissed Penny warmly, then they took her over to the table where a birthday cake proudly flamed with two pink candles, and a beautiful little girl, gurgled and laughed in her high chair.

As a Horrible Example, the evening was an awful flop!

Nick and Cara had achieved a contented relationship which was founded on something much more deep and lasting than courtship infatuation. There was a bond between them which showed in the way they exchanged meaning glances, and smiled understandingly at each other. Kitten had grown strong and healthy and pretty. She was an adorable child. Penny fell in love with her.

Finally when sleepy Kitten had been carried off to bed by Nick, Penny faced Cara, and knew she was in for questions that were going to hurt.

"And when are you and Van going to take the Big Leap?" Cara asked, sure enough, like the echo to Penny's thoughts.

Penny went into the reasons why she hadn't married. It was odd, but all at once they didn't seem as valid and important as they had done previously.

Cara frowned at her. "I think you're all haywire, Penny," she frowned. "You can't measure love by dollars and cents any more than you can ration affection. Love's something you give freely, if you're a generous soul. Somehow, I had you figured as one of the most generous souls on earth!"

Nick came back to report that Kitten was sound asleep. He grinned in the teasing manner men have, when they want to be playful and arch. "By the way, who's your rival, Penny? Better watch that boy of yours. They tell me that everybody in Van's office has fallen for that redhead!"

"Redhead?" repeated Penny stupidly, before she could stop herself.

Cara took one look at Penny's face and dashed to the rescue. "Look here Nick-angel!" she cried. "What's an old, married man doing, casting covetous eyes at a Titian Charmer?"

Nick blundered on, making things worse. "All of us wish for a minute we weren't engaged or married when we lamp that Bettina Black gal," he told them. "But she plays the field."

He said a lot of other things. Penny didn't pay much attention. She got away as soon as possible. The momentary glow she'd received from seeing Nick and Cara so happy together, had gone. She felt cold and lonely again.

All the way home on the jolting bus, Penny did some heavy thinking.

When was it that Van first had gotten cross and jumpy about the postponed marriage date? Was it about

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the time he'd mentioned casually that a gorgeous redhead named Bettina Black had come to work in his office? How absurd! And still...

Penny rang Van when she got home. She flung her pride into the nearest wastebasket and called him. Then she had to pick her pride up and dust it off and don it again, because Van didn't answer. She tried again, a couple of hours later, just as she was ready for bed. Again she heard nothing but the forlorn ringing of an unanswered telephone bell.

NEXT MORNING, just as she was leaving for work, she rang Van again. She was so glad, that her voice stuck in her throat, when he asked her to have lunch with him. But somehow, she managed to croak out that she'd love to go.

When they met, by common consent they avoided Luigi's. They went to a big place where the food was ordinary and the waiter was bored with them, instead of yearning over them.

The lunch was far from a success. Especially when Penny brought up Bettina's name.

She had been determined that wild horses couldn't make her bring up the redhead's name. Yet, to her own horror, she heard herself asking, "How are you doing in the dating sweepstakes at the office, Van? Dating Bettina Black, I mean."

Penny was far from being a jealous woman, but she sounded like one at that moment. Van froze, looking at her as if she'd suddenly turned into a stone.

He said swiftly, "If you were married to me, you'd have a right to tell me where to date and with whom. But since we seem to figure on getting married sometime next century, I'm dating anybody I doggoned please!"

Penny felt as if she'd blundered into the middle of a nightmare when she'd expected to find herself in a lovely dream. She gasped, "Van, don't! This is—*Us!* Remember? You and me. Surely we can't be saying these things to each other!"

Van looked at her. He leaned across the table and touched her fingertips with his hands and said quietly, "All right, then, darling. Let's stop all this nonsense and be married. Right away. Maybe in a week or ten days!"

While Penny hesitated, torn between her very real love for Van, and her desire to give their marriage every chance for survival, a couple behind them began to quarrel in an ugly manner over money.

Penny drew a deep regretful breath. "No, Van," she said slowly. "I'm still sure I'm right about this. Please wait just a little longer, dear. It will work out."

"Not with me it won't," said Van firmly. "I'm going to tell you something now. I stuffed waste paper into that damn grinning china cat's face last night! I kept my week's wages and I blew in every cent. Know where? At nightspots. And with whom? Bettina Black."

Penny was mad and scared clear to her toes, both at once. "That—that doesn't make sense, Van," she said slowly.

"It does, to me!" he told her grimly. "All along, I've wanted us to have some fun. I wanted to take you nice places. Instead, we both stuck all the money we could lay our hands on, into that infernal china cat! Well, from now on, the savings you have in that cat are all your own! I hope you enjoy the money. It represents all the good times you didn't want to have with me."

"But..." began Penny feeling as if she'd been run over by a truck.

He went on doggedly, "We're only young once, Penny. I don't make such a bad salary, actually. Plenty for us to get married on, if you'd have been content to start out with a little and take a chance, like the rest of the people we know. But you would insist on

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playing it differently, Penny, and we've lost something we had."

"What do you mean?" whispered Penny through stiff lips.

"I mean that all this saving and scrimping and never going dancing and never having any fun, has done something to our love. Maybe it's made our love a stingy, miserly little love, instead of a big, generous, overflowing love."

Penny looked down. She couldn't see the tablecloth very well. She murmured, "Are you telling me you—you don't love me any more, Van?"

He got up. "I wouldn't say that, Penny. I just asked you to marry me, right away. Remember?" He waited.

Penny tried hard to tell him that she would marry him. That nothing else in the whole world mattered but him. The words stuck in her throat.

He said slowly, "Be seeing you around, Penny. Goodbye."

"BE SEEING you, around!" The fateful words echoed in Penny's mind for the next three days, like a dirge of love.

All their mutual friends took great care to tell Penny that Van and Bettina and another couple were a flaming foursome in all the nightspots. Penny smiled and smiled till her mouth ached with the effort and to each person she said, "I know. It's a—a sort of agreement. Van is having his fling, that's all."

Only it wasn't as simple as all that and Penny knew it perfectly well.

In those seemingly endless three days she found out exactly how much she loved Van. By the end of the week, she was frantic. There seemed to be nothing she could do about the situation except wait it out, and Penny wasn't the waiting type.

She'd been out of circulation for such a long time, that she had trouble finding an escort who would take her to the newest dancing and dining spot in town. Because people had told her that the foursome had booked a table there that night.

They had told her, too, that there was gambling upstairs. And she knew that Van could be tempted by a roulette wheel.

She took great care with her looks. She yearned for a new dress, but she curbed the desire until almost too late. Then she dashed out and bought a dramatic black and put gardenias in her hair.

Bill, the old boy-friend, seemed quite bowled over when he saw her. Which helped.

She let him kiss her a couple of times in the taxi on the way to the nightclub. That was so she wouldn't feel so furiously jealous of Van and the redhead. The kisses were a total waste of time, so far as Penny was concerned. Though Bill didn't seem to find them so. He became almost *too* ardent!

Penny thought, "What a fool I was, to try and measure love by how much money she could save towards marriage! I've thrown my dear love, right square into the eager arms of a man-eating tiger!"

She was more than ever convinced of that, when she saw Van with the redhead.

Bettina was very, very beautiful, in a white dress that was tight over her slim, provocative hips and her ample bodice. She looked very sleek and terribly sure of herself.

When Van saw Penny, gladness flamed in his eyes for just a moment. Then it faded, leaving Penny feeling terribly bereft and frantic. Van came over and asked Penny to dance, when Penny had given up hope and decided he was going to ignore her.

Penny murmured, "Dance with Van's girl, will you, Bill?"

Bill looked sulky, till he saw who Van's date was. But when he did see, he practically fell over his own feet getting to Bettina.

Van and Penny danced. The magic was gone out of their steps.

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Van said, "I'm surprised to find you, wasting your money on a gaudy night-spot like this. But then, of course, it isn't *your* money, is it?"

Penny's heart hurt sharply, but she said quietly, "No. It isn't my money. It's Bill's money. I don't love Bill and I don't want to marry him. Therefore I don't care what he does with his money."

VAN SAID abruptly, "Paste this one in your memory book, Penny. I'll never love anybody but you. You can be sure I wouldn't have become involved with Bettina, if I hadn't been ripe for the picking, because you kept me dangling on the marriage line so long!"

Penny flamed out, "Men always blame the girl they love, when they want the excuse to flirt with another girl!"

Van looked at her, his blue eyes very sad. "No girl can lose a man, Penny, if she doesn't do something to drive him from her. I love you. But I could never go through life, married to someone who values money more than love. A woman who's afraid to take a chance on marriage. A girl who keeps a china-cat cash register in place of a heart!"

Penny shook her head. "It—it wasn't like that!" she whispered.

Van laughed. A bitter sound. "Well, you can say, 'I told you so,' plenty, Penny," he told her almost savagely.

She asked, "What do you mean, Van? and her voice was anxious.

"Bettina and I went upstairs to the gambling rooms here last night. I lost all the money I had with me. She suggested my signing IOUs because she knew the man who ran the place. I... Well, I lost..." His voice trailed away.

Penny felt sick. "How much?" she snapped.

He looked down at her, his face hard. "I knew you'd take it like that," he shrugged. "All right. Go ahead. Crow! A thousand dollars! They're tough, too. I have to pay, in a week. You don't know where I could dig up a thousand bucks in a week, do you, Penny?"

Penny said, "Van, how could you have been such an utter drip! A thousand dollars! Plenty to get married on! We have five hundred dollars in the china cat and..."

The music had slurred to a close.

Penny murmured, "Let's duck out on your man-eating tiger and Bill. They're too busy impressing each other with their importance to pay much attention to us. I—I've got an idea."

To her surprise, Van did go with her.

They drifted back to the table and collected Penny's purse and coat. They left. The music was playing again and Bill and Bettina were dancing cheek to cheek.

In the taxi, Penny said, "You can have the money in the china cat, of course, Van. Half is yours anyhow and you can have my share. And I've been thinking. My Aunt Flora has plenty of money. Maybe we could borrow the rest of the money from her."

Van looked at her as if she'd turned into a good fairy or an angel. He gasped, "You mean—you'd give up the money in the china cat to help me settle a gambling debt?"

Penny said slowly, "Of course, Van. I—I made a pretty big mistake about this whole thing. I'm beginning to realize that now."

At first he wouldn't accept the money in the china cat and he wouldn't go with her to her aunt's apartment. But in the end, by dint of sheer perseverance, she got him to go with her. Aunt Flora was adamant against lending money at first. But when they'd both explained, she grudgingly gave them a check.

There was five hundred and two dollars in the china cat!

Penny brushed back her hair from her flushed face and said, "There. That does it, Van. You can pay that IOU tomorrow."

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Then she drew a deep breath. "And —and Van, I... Can't we get married right away? I—I've learned my lesson. I don't over-value money now. I see how unimportant it is."

To her amazement, Van looked at her in horror.

"We can't get married, on nothing!" he told her. "We wouldn't have a cent. And we owe your aunt five hundred dollars!"

An odd expression flitted over his face the moment he had uttered the words. He went on slowly, before she could speak, "Why! For the first time, Penny, I understand how you've felt about—financial security! I thought you just were being—stingy or something. Now, things seem different."

Penny said slowly, "I understand how you've felt, too, Van. I—want to marry you, right away; and you're the one now, who—who won't take a chance."

HE LOOKED at the clock. He said, "The Purple Cat hasn't closed yet, Penny. Let's go back there and pay off this debt. As of now. Then we can consider this question of getting married."

Penny's heart went cold. She thought, "Maybe, after knowing Bettina, he doesn't want to marry me now! Maybe I've lost him forever, because I wanted to be financially secure before we married."

They were busy each with his own thoughts, in the taxi going back to the nightclub.

Bettina and Bill had disappeared. Penny was glad of that. The music was playing. Van said, "Let's have a dance first, Penny. Before we go up to pay off the money."

Penny whispered, "I'd love that, Van."

He took her in his arms. This time, it wasn't like dancing with a stranger. This time, it was like coming home. His arms were strong and warm and tender. And Penny belonged in the circle of his arms.

"You'd really marry me, even if we started out in debt?" he asked, his eyes warmly eager.

Penny looked up at him through tears. "I'd be the happiest girl in the world, if you wanted me to marry you," she said. "I've done exactly what I was trying so hard to avoid. We've quarreled. We've made each other unhappy. And it wasn't lack of money, either." She drew a long breath. "I'd marry you tomorrow, Van," she said, "and I don't care if we don't have two cents to rub together, either!"

His arms tightened lovingly around her.

"I love you, Penny," he said, and his voice was unsteady. "I won't marry you till we've saved a little money. But I love you completely now! You're—wonderful, darling."

There was a stir and a rustle of excitement sweeping over the room. The music played loudly, but it couldn't hide sounds of running feet and excitement and chaos on the floor above.

Somebody cried, "Let's get out of here! The gambling set-up upstairs is being raided!"

Penny found herself being carried out of the place by Van. Outside, they waited on the fringe of the crowd to see what went on. They were hand in hand, and nothing but that fact, mattered to Penny.

A man said to Van in a disgruntled tone, "What do you know about that? Crooked! That's what the gambling set-up was! Crooked! Some sucker tipped off the police. Wish I'd given those crooks IOU's instead of good, hard cash. They were cheats!"

Penny whirled about to face the man. "Isn't *any* gambling debt a debt of honor?" she gasped.

The man was contemptuous. "Honor? Those thieves! Don't make me laugh! They were winning by unfair means. Of course, there's no honor in *that!*"

Penny found herself in a taxi being kissed by Van to within an inch of her

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life. She clung to him. She gave him back kiss for kiss, ardently.

Van said, "We've been saved by the gong, darling! We've got another chance. You can tear up your aunt's check, and we'll use the money that was in the china cat for a down-payment on a marriage licence. What do you say, honey?"

Penny stopped kissing Van long enough to murmur, "A marriage licence is only two dollars, dear. Let's blow the rest in on a deluxe honeymoon to remember all our lives."

Van whispered, "You *have* changed, darling. But so have I! We'll spend three hundred dollars on a honeymoon and save the other two hundred toward household expenses."

"Household expenses! What lovely words!" said Penny ecstatically.

Then she held up her lips for another wonderful kiss.

THE END

Sting of Doubt

When I am grieved, beyond the panacea
That drugs can give, joy's candle guttered out
Then what is there, I ask, that now can be a
Solace; or take away the sting of doubt?
I loved her as a man can love perfection,
In her a lode so pure, it held no dross.
Now faith seems past, beyond resurrection,
And there is nothing to assuage my loss.
She gave no hint of any dialectic
Uncertainty, my grief o'er flows the brim,
He was a football player, brash and heedless,
After the game, she had a coke with him.

Lalla Mitchell Thornton

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WARM HEART, Cold Heart

"I—I've never kissed any man like that before..." She felt like a gauche, immature girl.

By Gale Owens

IT WAS NICE of Gerry, Andrea conceded, to ask her for dinner but did she have to insist on her coming when her brother Greg was home? Not that Andrea was averse to meeting eligible young men, but Greg sounded—well, difficult. Gerry and Andrea were best friends so it was only natural that Andrea knew the inside story of Greg's decision to move here from his home

What did Greg think she was—someone he could take out just when it was convenient for him?

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town where he had been the successful young man about town.

Greg had been engaged to the wrong girl. He was supposed to be still in love with her in spite of their broken engagement. Her name was Janice, and he'd met her shortly after his return from fighting in Korea where he'd been twice wounded and discharged from the service after the second time. He had thrown himself into his interrupted career and become a success; he was considered *the* catch of the town.

It wasn't long after Janice came into his life, beautiful, spoiled Janice, the daughter of one of the top drawer families in town, that they'd made plans to get married. Janice's family had been happy about it, but not Greg's. They'd tried to show Greg that Janice wasn't in love with him at all, but wanted him for his ability to make money and get ahead, that she was already driving him and would forever keep his nose to the grindstone, that underneath her beautiful exterior there was a cold hardness. But Greg had thought she was perfect.

Then two weeks before the wedding was scheduled, they'd quarreled. She had been needling him into buying way beyond his means, a new home larger and more expensive than they really needed, a new high-priced automobile, custom made furniture. It was the latter they fought over. She'd ordered a lot of furniture from an exclusive shop for delivery after their marriage. He'd protested, said it was too costly; he was in too deep already. The result was that Janice gave him back his ring. She didn't want to marry him if he wouldn't give her everything she wanted.

GERRY AND her husband Bob had invited Greg to live with them when he came to town; they had an extra room and bath finished on the second floor. Gerry had tried before to get Andrea to meet Greg, but this was the first time her plans had carried through. She didn't want Greg to think she was trying to throw Andrea at him, but she did want Andrea to help him forget. "You have a way with men, Andy," she said, "and you're so darn good looking—he needs someone like you."

The drip, Andrea thought, couldn't even get over his own heart-break, brooding around, being a problem. But for Gerry's sake, she would try to interest him, pull him out of his pit of misery. She dressed especially careful, wearing a new dress with a tiny waist and full skirt that subtly showed off her good figure to advantage. She brushed her tawny hair until it shown and fell in soft ringlets, put on her high heeled pumps that accented her slender ankles and nicely rounded calves. Men always showed an admiration for her looks, it shouldn't be too hard to perk him up.

As she paid the taxi driver and walked up to Gerry and Bob's front door, she found herself confronted with the horrible thought—*what if he fell for her?* How could she let him down? This situation could lead to complications. She began to wish she hadn't told Gerry she'd try to help him forget. But Gerry had always been such a good friend, she could hardly have refused.

"You look like a dream, Andy," Gerry whispered leading her in the living room where men's voices sounded. Bob called as they came in, "Hi there, Andy."

The other man in the room looked up from the pipe he was knocking against the palm of his hand to meet her eyes across the room. Andrea felt a sudden shock, like a bolt of electricity went through her. This young man was attractive, vital, the kind you dream about meeting some day. There were introductions; she smiled and tried to remember that she was supposed to bowl him over. Only he was so different from what she'd expected.

He was tall with a good build, broad shoulders, and a look of strength. His eyes were dark and penetrating. He

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didn't act morose or heartbroken at all, just a little aloof and cool like. If she hadn't known about his past, she would have thought he just wasn't the play boy type and admired him for it. She began to wonder how she was going to attract him when he acted so disinterested and gave her no opening.

He was polite enough during dinner and the evening, but for all the interest he showed in her, she might as well have been dull and plump. It was downright frustrating. He did offer to take her home to her one room efficiency apartment, though, purely out of good manners.

But here again he was impersonal, talking about his work, something he did show an interest in. He stopped his car on a hill overlooking the town. Tiny lights twinkled below, a crescent of a moon shone in a dark sky studded with stars, a light breeze blew in the open windows.

THEY SAT for quite awhile. He talked on about a plan he was working out; it was a little deep for Andrea but she managed to understand enough to show an intelligent interest. She found herself thinking. Most men stop to make love, now *this* one stops to talk. It was a relief in a way, not to have to try to discourage such attempts at love making, to just relax. She leaned back against the seat and moved her legs to stretch them a little. "Oh, oh," she cried moving forward.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She laughed, "My shoe came off."

He leaned towards her, "Here, let me help you," picking up the shoe. She slid her foot into it.

"You've got a nice ankle," he commented straightening up.

"Why I didn't think you noticed my looks at all."

"You must think I'm blind," he said drily looking down at her, his eyes dark, impelling.

She looked in his eyes and felt the sensation of being in a vacuum. His arm slid around her as he leaned close and kissed her hard. For a moment she returned the pressure of his lips and felt a wild ecstacy at his touch, like a bomb bursting at the contact of a spark. She responded with a reckless abandon she'd not known herself capable of. Then abruptly she stirred away from his embrace.

He released her immediately, "I'm sorry," his voice was tight, "I didn't stop for that. It just happened." He moved away from her.

"It's all right," she told him quietly, emotions churning inside her. He might look cool, and act aloof, but he could certainly kiss with warmth and intensity. She was still having trouble catching her breath. A moment ago she was glad he made no effort to make love to her, now she wanted him to crush her in his arms, to kiss her again. She stole a glance at his profile. No, he wasn't going to. He was intent on turning the car onto the main street, and he looked serious, almost grim.

She caught her lip, maybe she shouldn't have returned his kiss so fervently, maybe he thought she was too responsive. Maybe he liked a girl more reserved. Janice sounded like she'd be cold and unfeeling.

"I—I've never kissed any man like that before," she plunged, her cheeks burning; she felt like a gauche, immature girl.

He turned to her with a quick half grin. "Well, don't be so upset about it—just chalk it up to the night and the moon." His eyes flicked over her briefly, "Only—"

"Only what?"

His voice grew serious, "If I were you, I'd watch the night and the moon. You're a mighty attractive girl."

Well! Did he think she was sweet sixteen or something? As though she didn't know *anything*. But, of course, she relaxed some, he couldn't know that she had fallen headlong in love with him. That was a relief, she wouldn't want him to know *that*.

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SHE REALLY didn't expect to see him again except through Gerry but to her surprise he telephoned her two evenings later. "Bob and Gerry are planning a steak fry Saturday," he told her, "Would you care to go with me?"

Her heart was pounding as she accepted. The evening proved to be fun even if Greg was provoking. Oh, he was nice to her, but in a sort of detached way, almost brotherly, she decided. And when he kissed her, he made it brief and casual like. Although he asked to see her again, his attitude remained the same, sometimes far away when she knew he must be thinking about Janice, sometimes friendly, other times protective like.

Such as the time she accepted a date with Ted, handsome and dashing but reckless and accustomed to having his own way. Gerry mentioned the date in Greg's presence; Ted was one of their crowd. He gave Andrea an odd look and when Gerry left the room for awhile, he told Andrea, "What do you want to go out with him for? He's not good enough for you."

She felt flattered and smiled slowly, "Ted's good looking and he's fun besides. What's the matter with him?"

He reached for his pipe on the table and studied it thoughtfully. She almost decided he wasn't going to answer her. Then he said abruptly, "He's not reliable," tapping the pipe against his palm. Andrea thought of the time Ted had been at a party, thoroughly and disgustedly drunk. Well, he'd never been like that in her company.

Greg added suddenly, "You might think it's none of my business but you need someone to watch out for you. You've been lucky so far, but one of these days you're going to fall head over heels in love. If he isn't the right one, you're going to get hurt. And—" he stood up abruptly, "—it's darn hard to take. I know. I've been through it." He put his hand on her shoulder briefly and gave her a quick grin, "Take it easy, huh?"

He left the room. She sat as still as death. *It's too late, Greg,* she thought. *I'm already hopelessly in love. I'm already hurt.* She looked into space, *Oh, couldn't you love me just a little, Greg?*

Tears gathered in her eyes. Gerry coming in the room again saw them and pressed her lips together grimly. "That idiot," she said softly glancing at the doorway through which Greg had gone upstairs to his room.

Andrea got up meeting Gerry's eyes. Gerry knew, then. "It's not his fault, Ger," Andrea answered in a low tone. It was really kind of her not to bring up the fact that Andrea was supposed to have attracted *him.*

Gerry pulling on her gloves sighed, "Look, Andy, if you really want the guy, you'll have to do more than just dream about him. Put on a real compaign. I'll help all I can," she spoke quietly so there was no chance of Greg's hearing. "Well, let's go downtown and get some shopping done."

Andrea picked up her purse, "I don't know if I can deliberately try to make him interested in me now that I feel the way I do about him," she said as they went out to Greg's car. He'd told them to use it for the afternoon.

Gerry slid behind the wheel, "Of course, you *can.* I wish you *would.* There's no one I'd rather have for a sister-in-law, you know that."

AND SO ANDREA tried. She dressed especially attractive, tried to be subtly flattering and provocative. It was fun in a way. Just being with Greg was fun, enough to make her life complete. It was naturally easy for her to cater to his wishes. Gerry helped all she could, inviting Andrea over every chance she got, throwing them together yet not overdoing it. And it seemed the campaign was working. It seemed to Andrea that he was melting, beginning to take a real interest in her.

Then out of a clear sky, something

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happened. It started on Greg's birthday. Gerry planned a surprise dinner for him with Andrea in on it—just the four of them, Greg, Andrea, Bob and Gerry.

Andrea came right from the office, dressing up her simple but well designed dress with white frothy accessories. Her heart was beating faster than usual and there was an extra sparkle in her eyes as Gerry let her in the kitchen entrance. "Does he know I'm coming?" she asked.

Gerry said, "No, and he doesn't even realize it's his birthday. Neither Bob nor I said a word."

Andrea held her breath as she heard his voice in the living-room talking to Bob. She brought out a little package, simply wrapped. "It's a paper weight," she whispered, "but not just an ordinary one. I hope he likes it." It had cost more than she should have paid, but it was impersonal enough. With it on his desk he would be reminded of her many times a day, she hoped. And his desk needed something. It had looked so bare, she'd thought, the day she'd met him at his office for a luncheon date.

"Oh, he'll like it," Gerry said, her voice sounded preoccupied.

Andrea opened her eyes, "Maybe I shouldn't have come."

"Don't start acting like that; I'm more glad than ever that you're here," she didn't explain but went on, "Now go on in before he hears our voices. And you look heavenly, so quit acting so nervous. Now get!" She gave Andrea a friendly shove.

Andrea went into the living room, her heart tied in a knot. Greg and Bob were talking sports as she came in; Greg was saying, "—*if* they get a winning streak." He looked up.

"Hello, Bob," she said and then to Greg, "Hi."

"Well, hello!" he got up, surprise on his face.

She held out the little package, "Happy Birthday, Greg."

For a second she thought he wasn't going to take it, then he reached for it with a smile, "Thank you. You know, I didn't think anyone remembered it."

She smiled, too, and then moving closer to him reached up and kissed him on the cheek, "It's sort of a surprise. I hope you have a real nice year ahead."

She caught a startled expression on his face; then recovering quickly, he pressed her shoulder gently and thanked her again. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming? I'd have picked you up," he told her. But he seemed almost embarrassed by the fact that she was here—why?

Gerry came in then announcing dinner, and giving Greg her birthday greetings and a gift from Bob and her. Throughout dinner, Greg was cheerful and you could tell he was pleased at their planning this in his honor, but he seemed to be holding his emotions in restraint, as though he were covering an inner excitement. He was extra nice to Andrea, but in a way that almost frightened her. Something wasn't quite right, but what? Did he think she was getting to be too much of a good thing?

AS SHE HELPED Gerry clear the table, she whispered in the kitchen, "Greg is so kind of far away tonight."

Gerry stacked some dishes, "I thought he was hiding it rather well, myself."

"Hiding what?" a cold chill went through Andrea.

"He got a letter from *her* today."

"Oh. Oh!"

"He put it in his suitcoat pocket and when he took his coat off to go down the basement to fix my washing machine cord, I sneaked a look."

Andrea held her breath.

"She wants him back," Gerry whispered, "she says she made a mistake, that she really loves him. Too much to let him go. She says she will do anything to get him back and wants him

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to come up this week end so they can talk it over."

"Oh." Andrea felt a sharp pain in her chest like someone had put a knife through it. She let a plate slip through her fingers. It crashed to the floor. "Oh Gerry! One of your good dishes. I—" she cried.

"It's all right," Gerry said soothingly, "I'd have thrown it if I were you."

Later Greg suggested they take in a show, and Andrea was relieved. It was becoming difficult to pretend a gayness she didn't feel. Maybe watching a movie she'd be able to forget for awhile. Maybe he felt that way, too. He wouldn't have to pretend he was enjoying her company when all the time he was thinking of Janice.

Greg took her home. As they stood on the doorstep, she hesitated a minute. He hadn't always, but lately he had been kissing her good night. He made no move to take her in his arms. She felt as though the pain in her chest would burst. He said carefully, looking down at her, "By the way, if I don't have to show up at the plant Saturday, I'm going to drive home over the week end."

She held up her head. "All right, I won't plan on our date for Saturday evening then," she forced her voice to be casual, light. *Tear my heart out, break it in pieces! You were right. I don't think I can take it.* Her thoughts were screaming.

She turned away abruptly, calling a muffled, "Good night," over her shoulder. She got to her room and threw herself on her bed; dry noiseless sobs racking her body.

He did go home, and she went to a movie with another girl, something she hadn't done on a Saturday night before. Then on Tuesday Greg called her. She felt herself shaking as she heard his voice, she couldn't h lp it. He wanted to know if she would go on a double date with him the next evening. She could hardly believe her ears. They hadn't made up then! Oh happy, wonderful day!

But when she saw him, she wasn't sure. His manner was friendly but nothing more. He seemed miles away. It was torture being with him when she knew he must be thinking of Janice. And then he completely surprised her by asking her for a date the coming Saturday evening. He was quite engaging about it, too. He tilted her chin up and asked, "How about it? Shall we go out among 'em? Just you and I alone for a change?"

Not anyone else, no party, no crowd. It seemed sudden happiness was almost too overwhelming. She smiled up at him and assured him she'd be glad to. He kissed her, gently but thoroughly. She was in seventh heaven and drifted off to sleep that night feeling his arms around her, his lips on hers, assuring herself that this was *it*. He was in love with her, at last. He'd been thinking about it all evening. After seeing Janice again, being with her, he realized he *wasn't* in love with her after all.

EVEN WHEN he telephoned her Saturday morning to tell her he was sorry but he wouldn't be able to keep their date, something had come up unexpectedly, she didn't have any misgivings. She was disappointed, not curious, oddly enough. He said he'd explain when he saw her. Work, she thought, he'd been terribly busy with extra government contracts.

When she talked to Gerry later in the day and mentioned that her date with Greg was off, Gerry suggested she come over and stay for dinner. She, too, thought Greg would be working. She and Bob weren't doing anything; they could play some records and have coffee in the evening. Maybe if Greg got home early enough they would play a little bridge. It was natural for Andrea to accept. She didn't even think twice about it.

She began to get ready, carefully grooming herself. There were stars in

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her eyes. Maybe after all, she would see him tonight. She was just putting on her shoes when the telephone rang. It was Gerry again, "Thank heavens you haven't left!"

"Why?" Andrea felt the first tingle of apprehension.

"Don't come," her voice sounded hushed.

Andrea cried, "What's wrong? What's the matter?"

"Should I give it to you straight?" and before Andrea could answer she went on, "Greg just called me. Andy he's—he's bringing Janice here with him for—dinner."

"Oh." There was nothing else to say. Shattered pieces of her world were jumping around inside piercing her heart with pin point edges of pain.

"Andy?"

"Yes? Is there more?" forcing herself to be calm, matter of fact.

"Isn't that enough? And don't take it lying down, Andy. Let's do something about it."

"What? Put strychnine in her coffee?" with a false laugh.

"That's an idea—but it's not practical. He mentioned going night clubbing afterwards. Wants Bob and me to come along. It would be real chummy if you could come, too, with an escort."

"Oh Gerry, be sensible."

But after they finished their conversation, Andrea realized she couldn't be sensible herself. Anger streaked through her. Oh fine! Standing her up for Janice. Then he still *was* in love with Janice. She flung her shoe across the room. Well! She just wasn't going to take it! What did he think she was—something to take out for convenience? Just marking time with her until he got Janice back? She stood biting her lips, forcing the tears back. She couldn't throw herself on the bed and cry her eyes out—not again. She *wouldn't*, she *wouldn't*.

She'd get a man to go night clubbing herself—maybe they could bump into Greg and his precious Janice. Wouldn't that be something? Her heart was pounding—and if he ever had the nerve to ask her out again she'd laugh right in his face.

Then she wilted. Where would she get another man? The only one she knew now besides Greg was Ted. He'd given her quite a play but she'd managed to politely evade him. He wouldn't want to take her out again. Anyway, he was undoubtedly busy. But she was angry enough to brush aside these reasonings. She didn't care, she couldn't just sit alone and go crazy thinking. She had to try to find someone to take her out.

So she called Ted finally and got him, too. He was undeniably pleased to hear from her. Before she could suggest a date, he asked her for one. "I can be ready about eight," she told him.

He sounded astonished and cried with a happy ring in his voice, "I'll be there!"

She felt a faint qualm for a minute at his exhuberance, but shrugged her shoulders. What was wrong about dating a man that was obviously crazy about you? She could stand a little admiration.

As she finished dressing, misgivings came over her. She'd never bump into Greg, never, not accidentally. Of course, not accidentally! But maybe if they planned it—! She telephoned Gerry again, got her to promise to see that they went to The Starlight, one of the better roadside night clubs.

AS SHE AND Ted entered the Starlight, her excitement mounted. In the few seconds before the head waiter came forward, she tried to scan the room, but didn't see them. They got a choice table; Ted ordered them a drink. He was beaming, confided that he'd broken a date to take her out. Oh no, she thought with a little twist of her heart. How ironic.

And then she saw them come in. She saw Gerry first with her smooth, dark hair, then the other girl beautiful

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with that polished chiseled look that suggests Vogue, finishing schools and society reports, then Bob and—Greg. Her heart stopped completely. She hadn't thought of how she'd feel seeing Greg with Janice. She'd only concentrated on getting here. There was a crushing weight in her chest, a tight choking in her throat, a weakening pain in her knees. But she managed to retain her poise. Ted didn't even guess.

They took a table almost behind them. Only Gerry who was looking, noticed them. Ted didn't see them come in. Andrea immediately got Ted to dance and afterwards steered him back to their table in such a way that they had to pass Greg's party.

She pretended complete astonishment. "Gerry!" she cried stopping short, "and Bob!" Her eyes passed over Janice; Greg was saying something to her so their heads were close. Andrea felt giddy but she tried to make her voice only politely surprised, "And Greg!"

She caught him completely unawares. His head snapped up and he looked at her as though she were something terrible happening. He automatically got to his feet. It gave her an immediate sense of triumph to see him momentarily upset. She met his brown eyes mockingly, and felt the room spin around.

Gerry spoke first in feigned surprise, "Well hi! What a small world!"

Andrea almost laughed. Ted put his arm around her giving Greg a quick look as he did. Janice was introduced; some bright, casual remarks were made. Just before she and Ted left for their table, Andrea looked up and met Greg's eyes. They were dark, unfathomable and he stood stiff and aloof like. She felt like crawling in a shell—if only there were one to crawl in.

Back at their places, she felt ill, terribly sickeningly ill. The only thing she had accomplished by this mad escapade was to hurt herself more—to put an even further distance between her and Greg.

Ted put his hand over hers bringing her thoughts back to her immediate surroundings. She tried a half smile at him and made a move to pull her hand away.

"No," he said determinedly, "Don't. You're my girl." His face was slightly flushed, his eyes bright. For the first time, she realized with a shock that he had been drinking quite a lot—fast too. It was beginning to show.

"Oh Ted," she pulled her hand away. "Let's go some place else."

"No. You wanted to come here. I want you to be happy. We'll stay here. Don't you like it now?" and he ordered more drinks, another double shot for himself. "I'm celebrating," he told the waitress, "I've got my favorite girl out tonight."

SHE LOCKED her hands together in her lap. The evening was turning into a threat. Ted could be unmanageable, stubborn, loud. Greg had been right to warn her about him. Well, maybe she could handle him, she told herself, get him to calm down and stop drinking. She smiled at him, "Let's dance, Ted, hmmm?"

He did rally for awhile and behave quite well, but he wouldn't give up his drinks. "Just one more," he told her each time he downed a double shot. It was too much. He was getting drunk. Finally she told him, "Unless you quit drinking, Ted, I'm going home."

"G' home," he muttered. She stared at him unhappily. How could anyone be so foolish as to get in such a state.

She got up. Nothing unpleasant enough to cause a disturbance had occured yet. If she could get out to the lobby and call a cab, no one in Greg's crowd would know her handsome escort was turning into a drunken embarrassment. They seemed to be having a good time. She'd caught Greg looking at her a couple of times, but as soon as she'd looked up, he'd turned away. At the moment he was

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dancing with Janice. She started for the lobby and a phone booth.

Just before she reached the doorway, she heard a commotion behind her. "That's my girl, gotta catch her before she leaves me," and then she heard a loud shout, "AAAnnd—rrreaaaa!"

She closed her eyes and turning around slowly opened them. Ted was shouting his way through the room, bumping into people, jarring tables, tilting drinks. She caught the amused glances on some faces, the disgusted ones on others. This was a nightmare—the kind you sometimes witness happening to other people, but not the kind of thing that happens to you. She held her breath. If only she could wake up and find herself in bed dreaming up this whole business. She could almost hear Janice commenting to Greg, "How revolting."

She waited for Ted to stumble up to her. She caught the headwaiter's glance in Ted's direction as they passed him. In the lobby, Ted paused unsteadily eying the tiny bar in the corner. Andrea started for the exit, but Ted caught her arm. In spite of his condition, his grasp was firm. She fell back, crying angrily, "Leave me alone! I'm not going home with you."

"Oh yesssh, you are. You lil spit fire," he flung his arm around her waist tightly, "You're my baby, yessir, you're my baby," his voice ended in a sing song.

Anger didn't work. "Please, Ted," she said softly.

He made his arm tighter as she tried to pull away, "Nope, you're gonna stay with me while I have another drink and then—"

His words broke off as someone caught him by the shoulder and swung him around, "Get your hands off Andrea!"

It was Greg. Her immediate relief was followed by a flood of embarrassment. But everything happened so swiftly she had no time for any more emotions. Ted took a quick swing at Greg but missed. In the next second a bouncer sprang from nowhere and locked Ted's arms behind him. "All right, Bud, that's all for you." and he was propelled to the exit. Just before he was shoved outside, Andrea saw him fall limply.

SHE TOOK a deep breath and stole a look at Greg who was looking at her with that dark, unfathomable look. She glanced away and stammered, "I think Ted's passed out. What should I do? Get his keys and drive his car and take him home?"

"You can't handle him," Greg answered shortly, "I'll see that he gets home, and I'll take you home, too."

"Thank you," she said in a small voice.

"And what about me?" Janice asked in an icy tone. She had just now walked up and stood possessively near Greg.

"Don't worry," Greg's voice was calm, cool, "I'll be back. I was going back to the table to tell you but I won't have to now. Gerry and Bob will take care of you until I return."

Andrea said in a shaky voice, "I can take a taxi, Greg."

"No, I'll take you."

"Really, Greg," Janice said icily, "that would be the sensible thing to do. Let her take her boy friend home in a taxi since he's—under the weather. Why should you?"

Greg replied, "I'm taking them, Janice. I'll be back unless you want to come along—now."

"No, I believe I'll wait. 'By now." Andrea marveled at her cool composure. She wasn't going to make a scene, was she? She wasn't going to risk losing him again.

They were outside now, Andrea let out a little cry as she caught sight of Ted slumped on the far side of the bottom of the wide stairs leading from the Starlight.

"Don't worry," Greg told her, "he's

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just passed out. He does that. He's done for the night now, but he'll be all right again tomorrow."

He went to get his car and she waited beside Ted. Above a myriad of stars twinkled, a soft breeze was blowing, a crescent of a moon shone. All around was the quiet of the countryside, broken only by an occasional slam of a car door or a shrill laugh in the night. It was such a beautiful night, like the first night Greg had kissed her. But what a flop the night was, how terribly everything had turned out. Ted drunk. Greg coming back to Janice. She bit her lip.

Greg was back with the car. He got Ted into the back seat and came around to get her. He looked down at her, "I don't know what to say, Andy. I'm sorry about tonight. I've made a mess out of everything."

She fought to keep her composure, to stay cool and poised like Janice. "It's all right, Greg," she said in a choked voice, "I'm not angry or anything. You don't have to apologize."

"Oh, but I do. I wouldn't hurt you for the world. I know you were angry. I could read it on your face when you stopped at our table. You can't hide your emotions. You're not the type, I can tell what you're—"

"Oh!" she interrupted, sudden anger stinging her. "You've known all along that I've been in love with you. I suppose you've been taking me out to bolster your ego—to soothe your heartache. And now that you've got Janice back, you don't need me. Well, I don't need you either, you conceited—" words failed her and driven by hurt pride she swung out at him blindly.

He caught her hand before she could hit him. "Andy! Don't be angry. I—I didn't know. I had no idea. I—" he stood looking at her, "I've been completely blind."

SHE CAUGHT her composure, "Well, don't be alarmed, I won't be a pest. I'll stay as far away from you now as I can." And turning away she said, "L-let's go now."

He pulled her back, "No, Andy. Wait. I don't want you to go out of my life. I love you."

"Are you out of your mind? Standing me up for *her* and then telling me you love *me*. Oh Greg,—please."

"Andy, listen! I *do* love you. I didn't know it until tonight but I've been in love with you since the night you gave me that paper weight. Everytime I see it on my desk, I think of you, how sweet and thoughtful you are. I was in love with you then, but I wouldn't admit it. I'd had a letter from Janice that day. I guess you know I was engaged to her. Hearing from her brought everything back. So I went up to see her."

She held up her head. Could he *really* love her? "Yes, I know you did," she said.

"And you know the rest, too. I came back undecided. It hadn't been the same seeing her. Yet it didn't seem possible there was nothing left. I realized I was very fond of you. And when she called me this morning, I made up my mind to take her out—to settle it definitely. I had no idea I'd bump into you. That was appalling!" he paused shaking his head.

Then he continued, "I realized, though, Andy, before I even saw you tonight that Janice was just something I'd dreamed up, pinned my ideals on. You are what I want. It was torture for me in there after you showed up. I deserved it, I know. But—is it possible that after tonight you could care—just a little?"

A wild tumult of happiness swept through her. She said, "Just a little, Greg? I love you with all my heart!"

He gathered her in his arms, "Oh Andy, dear sweet Andy, I'll make up for it. I'll do everything I can to make you happy. I love you so much."

His lips found hers and they clung in an ecstatic embrace.

THE END

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"It's strictly sentiment with me," Donna insisted. "Collectors have offered me fancy prices for it. I won't sell!"

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A MATTER OF SENTIMENT

By Hester Holt

THE LITTLE lunchroom was crowded and noisy with practically all of Sun-Coast Products' executive staff, except the big-shots who drove into Los Angeles for lunch. Donna stood just inside the door and surveyed the prospects. One stool at the counter—no, Marie from the Art Department was heading for that. The booths—there was Nels Agard. She could sit with him. It'd give her a chance to ask if he and Anna were planning to take the kids on that picnic they'd been talking about.

Halfway to his booth, she almost stopped. The man with him was Mike Shail, who almost never condescended to eat at this plebeian joint. Mike, Sun-Coast's brilliant young sales manager, was engaged to Elsa Burnstall, of the wealthy, aristocratic Burnstalls. It was too bad. He didn't look like a fortune-hunter, either. A man as good-looking as Mike—tall, red-headed, with twinkling brown eyes—ought to have more sense than to be taken in by a thrill-hunter like Elsa. Not that it was any of Donna Reade's business, and certainly Elsa's money was an attraction few men could resist, to say nothing of Elsa's sophisticated blonde beauty.

Donna couldn't compete—not that she wanted to. Not that the idea had even crossed her mind. How could it? She was definitely a shrimp, five-feet-two in high heels, with brown hair that glinted copper in the sun, but when did Mike Shail ever see her in the sun? Her blue eyes were enormous in her small face, her nose turned up just a little at the tip, her mouth was wide and made for laughter instead of clever cutting epigrams—

If Elsa Burnstall was the kind of woman he liked, then Donna Reade was exactly the opposite!

Donna slid into the booth beside

Was Donna the city, cave-dweller type?

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Nels Agard, said "Hi," and picked up the menu.

"Hi," Nels said. "You get those figures typed for me?" Nels was production manager at Sun-Coast, and Donna was secretary to J. P. Oliver, the president. Donna nodded and said, "Sure, that's why I'm late. You'll find them on your desk. I'll have a cheese sandwich and a vanilla milkshake," she added as the waitress paused by the table.

She hadn't looked at Mike, but now she noticed that he was glowering at his empty plate. "How come you're eating with the proletariat?" she asked him, and he glared across the table at her.

"The guy's had a jolt," Nels rumbled placatingly. "His girl friend gave him back his ring."

"Oh." Donna tried to arrange her gamin face in an expression of sympathy, but her heart leaped hopefully. "That's too bad," she said politely.

"Skip it," Mike growled. "I wouldn't live on her money, and she wouldn't try to live on my salary, so that was that. Women," he added, staring accusingly at Donna, "are all alike. *Things* are more important to them than a husband, or love, or anything."

"That's not so!" Donna denied, rising to the defense of her sex. "Lots of women—"

"You, I suppose!" Mike scoffed. "Look, I'd be willing to bet even you have some precious possession in your apartment that you wouldn't part with for love or money. Haven't you?"

"YOU'VE been listening to gossip," Donna said. "Everybody that knows me has seen my grandmother's Wedgwood vase. It's all I have left from the house where we lived when I was little. Last relic of the Reade family's former splendor. I love the old thing."

"What'd I tell you?" Mike said, sounding vaguely disappointed.

"This is different," Donna argued. "It's a matter of sentiment with me. Collectors have offered me fancy prices for it, but I'd as soon sell my right arm."

"Hah!" Mike jeered. "A man ought to steer shy of any woman that has a household treasure like that. A man ought to steer shy of any woman that values the things money can buy more than she values love and marriage."

"You can't judge all women by Elsa Barnstall!" Donna said hotly, prepared to launch into a long argument. "How about the things money *can't* buy?"

Nels broke in, looking distressed. "Look, Donna. If you sold that vase, you could buy the acre out by our place—the one Mike wanted until he found out Elsa wouldn't think of living out in the country."

"You and Anna and the kids would be swell neighbors," Donna said wistfully, "but I couldn't sell the vase. No."

"You mean you'd like to live out in the sticks and plant things in the dirt?" Mike asked her curiously. "I thought you were more the city cave-dweller type."

"Because I live in an apartment now?" Donna asked scornfully. "I'll have you know, friend Mike, my family were farmers for generations. I'm a good secretary, sure, but I'll never feel truly at home until I'm living on my own land, no matter how small a place it is. Even an acre would do."

"A country cottage, complete with Wedgwood vase," Mike said, with what he probably thought was a sneer. It turned out to be just a grin, with a hint of speculation in it, at that.

Donna was getting mad again. "Go ahead and laugh," she snapped. "You probably can't understand how a keepsake could get to be the symbol of a person's happy childhood—" Nels coughed loudly.

"Having been brought up in an orphanage," Mike said coldly, "I prob-

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ably couldn't." Donna was instantly contrite, but before she could apologize, Mike's attention snapped to the door. Donna turned to look.

Elsa Burnstall stood at the cashier's counter by the door, buying a package of cigarettes. She was beautiful, all right, with her bright-gold hair and her sky-blue eyes. Probably, Donna thought with some satisfaction, she'd be absolutely colorless if it weren't for beauty shops. Dyed hair, mascara tinting her eyebrows and lashes—but there was nothing phony about the mink coat she wore draped carelessly over her shoulders, and her alligator pumps must have cost more than Donna's whole outfit.

Elsa, glancing around, saw them and came over to their table. "Hello, Michael," she said, but she was staring coldly at Donna. "You didn't lose much time, did you Michael?" she went on, and then, to Donna, "You're Mr. Oliver's secretary, aren't you? Seems to me somebody told me you were." Donna admitted it, although something in Elsa's tone made her feel as if she were admitting to being a shoplifter. "Michael, you stubborn creature," Elsa said then, "next thing I know you'll be taking up with chorus girls. You'd better come out to the house tonight. I want to talk to you." It was definitely an order.

MIKE'S JAW dropped, and a slow flush colored his tanned cheeks. Before he could say anything, Elsa swept out in a cloud of expensive perfume.

Nels looked worried. "You'd better watch out now, Donna," he said. "Elsa's dad and old J. P. are good friends. She could get you fired if she went about it just right."

"But it's so silly!" Donna said indignantly. "Just because I'm eating lunch at the same table! Anyway, how does she know I wasn't lunching with you, Nels?"

"Everybody knows I'm crazy about my wife," Nels grinned. "Besides, she's just probably trying to make Mike see reason."

"I've seen it," Mike said crisply. "All the time I was in Korea I built up a dream about a beautiful golden girl, and when I came back and met Elsa, she sort of blinded me, I guess. But believe me, pals, I've seen the light. I'll go over there tonight, but I'll do the talking!"

"Yeah," Nels said, sounding terribly pleased. "Only now don't you forget, Mike. Whenever you go out anywhere at all, you take your gun."

"Gun!" Donna gasped. "You're not going to shoot the gal, are you?"

"No." Mike grinned down at her, this time a real grin that recognized her as a person and made her heart do crazy acrobatics. "What Nels means is that I fired a guy this morning for being a crook, and he says he's going to get me. But good."

"The gun," Nels prompted, but Mike shook his head. "The Rangers got the kind of training that was made to order for taking care of guys like Sneeden," he said lightly.

They got up to go, each picking up his own check. Crossing the street to the plant, Mike said casually, "I've just remembered, Donna, Elsa collects Wedgwood. She'd probably be tickled pink if you'd sell her that vase. Think of the money she could pay. Think of that acre—"

"I think you're kidding," Donna

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broke in coldly. "I've told you how I feel about that vase, and that finishes it. The subject is closed. Period."

"I'm tired of fighting," Nels' deep voice broke in. "Quit it, you two. Why don't you kiss and make up? Then maybe Sunday you could go on a picnic with Anna and me and the kids. If you promise to be good. The spring flowers ought to be, and we could come back by way of Arvin."

"Did you say picnic?" Mike asked. "Gosh, I haven't been on a picnic for years. I'd like to go. I don't know about Miss Wedgwood here."

"I've been going on picnics with the Agards for a long time," Donna informed him with dignity. "You just haven't noticed how the other half lives."

That was how they left it, separating in the office wing, each to his own desk again. Mr. Oliver's offices were at the end of the main hall, with Donna reigning supreme in the reception room. Nels and Mike had offices across the hall from each other, just a step or two away—

JUST A FEW feet away from her. All that afternoon, Donna kept the thought in the back of her mind. Of course, he'd been there for a year, but he'd belonged to Elsa. Now—it was too good to be true. Mike Shail would never look at Donna Reade in a serious way, of course, but anyway he wasn't engaged to Elsa any more, and a girl could dream, couldn't she?

Mike was going on the picnic Sunday, too—

He was going to Elsa's tonight, though, and the girl was undoubtedly clever. If she wanted him back, she'd move heaven and earth to get him back. If she wanted him to live on her money, she'd manage that, too, somehow. The whole thing was pretty hopeless, but not as hopeless as it had been up until lunch time!

It didn't matter now; she could admit to herself that she'd been afflicted with shy little dreams about Mike Shail ever since he'd come home from Korea a year ago and walked into the office to ask for a job. Elsa and her father had been there that day, worse luck, and Elsa had instantly tagged Mike for her own. And Mike had seemed dazed. Even getting the job he'd asked for seemed unimportant to him. He couldn't take his eyes off Elsa long enough to look at one small, insignificant secretary sitting in the corner with her heart in her eyes.

In the months that followed, Donna had found out everything she could about Mike Shail. He and Nels had been in the same outfit, close friends through two years of war. Nels had been discharged first. When Mike got out, Nels had suggested that it would be nice if both of them worked for the same outfit, and there was this place about five miles from the plant where Nels and Anna had built their new house—it would be swell if Mike would build out there, too. Lots of land still for sale.... Mike promised to think about it. He didn't know, by the time matters progressed that far, whether Elsa would like living in the country. He'd been promoted to sales manager almost at once—

And then Mike and Elsa were engaged, and the bottom dropped out of Donna's small world for a while. Nels didn't like it, either, she could tell, particularly when Elsa laughed at the idea of a cottage in the sticks. Mike had been gloomy, and for months they saw practically nothing of him outside the office. Elsa saw to that. He even drove into the city for lunch with Mr. Oliver—or Elsa.

But that was all over now—unless Elsa, tonight, managed to talk him into living in her big Hollywood house!

That didn't bear thinking about. The only thing that *did* bear thinking about right now was the fact that Mike had promised to go with them to the mountains Sunday. There was something about the mountains in the spring—

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Donna was still moving in a hazy dream when she got home that night. The first thing she saw was the Wedgwood vase, on its small table just inside the door of her apartment. "You!" she said to it affectionately. "I don't think he meant all the things he said about you. He just doesn't understand!" She touched the smooth blue-and-white vase lovingly. It was a big thing, and heavy. A museum piece, really. Her grandmother had always called it "Donna's vase" because she'd loved it so, even when she was little. Mike Shail was just obsessed with the idea that all women were like Elsa!

Donna changed to cerise lounging pajamas, fixed dinner in the tiny kitchenette, and ate from a tray in the living room. She cleared up the dishes, settled down on the davenport with a book, and promptly fell asleep.

THE JANGLING telephone wakened her. "Miss Reade?" a woman's voice answered her sleepy "Hello." "I know this is a poor time to call, but I was so excited I couldn't wait until morning. This is Elsa Burnstall, and Mike tells me you have a lovely Wedgwood vase that would go beautifully with my collection. I'd like to come out and look at it, and if it's genuine, I'd be glad to pay you a hundred dollars for it."

Donna was wide awake now, and more furious than she had ever been in all her twenty-two years. After the way Elsa had talked to her only this noon! Besides, she sounded as if she'd be condescending, even to look at the vase! As if Donna ought to be honored by her interest!

"I take it you and Mike are engaged again," Donna said slowly, keeping the anger and pain out of her voice with an effort. Elsa laughed shortly.

"I'm not given to discussing my private affairs with office girls," she said, "but since you mention it, I may say that I'm doing all right. Now, about the vase—"

"It isn't for sale," Donna told her icily. "If Mike told you anything at all, he must have told you that. And even if I wanted to sell it, a hundred dollars is ridiculous. I've been offered many times that."

"Miss Reade," Elsa said, her voice softly threatening. "You'd better think over my offer, before you give a definite answer. You like your job, don't you?"

"Not that much," Donna said, and hung up.

So Elsa'd talked him 'round! What was Mike Shail now? A fortune hunter? Or a dream-hungry ex-soldier, taken in by a blonde with hair too brightly gilt, with eyes as hard as blue marbles—and with a mink coat worth at least five thousand dollars?

Come to think of it, what did all this make Donna Reade? A fool, of course, for ever allowing herself to fall in love with a tall red-headed guy whose dark eyes could be so gravely sober one minute and could twinkle so gaily the next. A fool for allowing herself, in the short space of one afternoon, to build and equip a cottage next door to Nels and Anna Agard—a cottage complete down to the last rose-bush, with a red-headed baby boy in a play-pen on the front porch!

Donna cried herself to sleep.

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THE NEXT day was Saturday, a rushed, hectic Saturday morning, as usual. Everybody was hurrying to get through a day's work in four hours, and practically everybody was planning to get out into the spring countryside for at least part of the weekend.

Donna rushed, too, but her heart wasn't in it. At any moment, now, Mike would come in and say he couldn't go tomorrow, after all. Because Elsa wanted him to go somewhere. Or maybe he'd already stepped across the hall and told Nels!

She'd almost forgotten Elsa's implied threat, when her buzzer sounded. She picked up a sheaf of letters to be signed, took her notebook and pencil, and went into Mr. Oliver's office. He didn't look up as she laid the finished letters on his desk and sat down, pencil poised above her open notebook.

Mr. Oliver was a small plump man with graying hair and shrewd gray eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses. Now, his round face was red as he fidgeted with the papers on his desk.

"This is a very unpleasant task, Miss Reade," he began, and Donna turned cold. She remembered then—

"Sim Barnstall is a good friend of mine," Mr. Oliver went on, "and his daughter is almost like my own. She is heartbroken right now, Miss Reade, because you have been the cause of a misunderstanding between her and the man she was to marry. That won't do. An engagement is almost as sacred as a marriage, and to go ahead and deliberately come between two people who are engaged is a serious thing. I don't want such a person in my organization."

"But, Mr. Oliver—" Donna began, shocked and at the same time furious at the injustice.

"There is no defense," Mr. Oliver said heavily. "You've been a good secretary, and I'm deeply disappointed in you. The cashier will give you two weeks' salary to make up for the lack of notice."

He glanced up at her, embarrassed, then his gaze went to the door. Donna hadn't heard it open, but she did hear Mike's voice, low and angry, as he said, "J. P., that's the worst day's work you ever did in your life. Miss Reade had nothing to do with my broken engagement. Elsa refused to live on my salary, and I have too much self-respect to live on her money. That's all there was to it at the time. Now, knowing how selfish and vindictive Elsa is, I wouldn't marry her on a bet. And if you fire Miss Reade on no more evidence than a pack of lies, you can fire me, too!"

His voice had risen as he approached the desk, and the last words were shouted. Mike's eyes were blazing and his fists, braced on the desktop, were clenched so tightly the knuckles showed white against the tan.

"WELL, NOW, Mike," Mr. Oliver cleared his throat. "Don't get so wrought up. I'm sure this can be adjusted. I guess Elsa was just upset and imagining things."

"Nuts!" Mike said through his teeth. "She knew what she was doing. She's convinced herself I'm in love with Donna, and she's mad, too, because Donna won't sell her an heirloom vase that's been in the Reade family for generations."

"Elsa is spoiled, of course," Mr. Oliver admitted thoughtfully. Then, his eyes beginning to show a twinkle, he asked, "And are you in love with Miss Reade?"

"I am not!" Mike yelled. "I just don't like to see anyone the victim of such a rank injustice. I couldn't be in love with a woman who worships an old blue-and-white vase!"

And he stalked out, without once looking in Donna's direction.

"Well, my dear," Mr. Oliver began, redder than ever now. "I seem to have put my foot in it rather badly. Can you bring yourself to forget what I said? Honestly, I don't know what

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I'd have done without you. You'll stay, won't you?"

"Of course, Mr. Oliver," Donna said gently. "You couldn't have known. Elsa was just—disappointed, I guess. I might have done the same thing, in her shoes."

"No," Mr. Oliver murmured, his keen gray eyes studying her. "No, I don't think you would. You're a kind person, and a generous person. Now about that list of specifications—"

Nothing more was said about Elsa's charges, and when Donna went home at one, her heart was singing. There was an undertone of doubt, but it was drowned out by the sureness of one known fact: Mike Shail had said he wouldn't marry Elsa on a bet!

On the other hand, what had he said about women who worshipped possessions? Now, that was unfair of him. Somehow, she'd have to make him see the difference. If she could!

Not that she'd ever have a chance to make him see anything—hadn't he also said, in a loud, emphatic voice, that he was *not* in love with Donna Reade?

She cleaned the apartment that afternoon, did her small laundry, washed her hair and manicured her nails. She wouldn't have time tomorrow—there'd be the picnic. She made a batch of her special cookies, with nuts and candied orange peel, to go with the bag of apples and oranges she'd bought on the way home as her contribution to the picnic lunch.

She was curled up with a book after dinner when Nels and Anna dropped in—with Mike Shail.

Nels and Anna were a beautiful couple, both tall and blond and very Swedish, both taking life calmly and making of it a lovely, serene setting for their love, their home, and their two children. Mike—well, Mike was himself, looking at her as if doubtful of his welcome at first, then prowling her little apartment as if he liked what he saw, until he reached the cherished Wedgwood vase on its little table by the door. He stared at it, a half-smile on his lips.

"We thought we'd drop by and plan tomorrow's lunch," Anna said, settling into the big chair. Donna's blue eyes went wide. It was always understood that she was to bring fruit and cookies—

Then she saw the smile that flashed for a quick moment between Nels and his wife, and understood. She felt a hot blush sweep her face, and was glad Mike still had his back turned to the room.

Nels and Anna were being matchmakers! Bless their hearts—but Mike Shail was not the kind to be maneuvered like that. Still, he was here in her apartment for the first time, and the Agards had brought him!

"My pals!" she muttered, then said, a little too loudly, "I got some fruit on the way home—"

"Lovely," Anna cut in smoothly. "And do I smell cookies? If you could bring some of those—"

"I DON'T see what's so exclusive about this thing," Mike growled from the corner. He turned and came toward them, the precious vase held carelessly between his two hands. "What's it got that Woolworth hasn't got?"

"Mike Shail!" Donna breathed in horror. "You drop that and I'll simply scalp you!"

She rescued it and put it back on the table.

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"Look, Donna," Mike said, "why don't you sell it? Hanging on to it like this makes you seem like Elsa, and you're not—I hope. Or are you? The only difference being that she has more to cling to. Women who attach exaggerated importance to—"

"You said that before," Donna cut in coldly. "Change the record, friend. That may be an ugly old thing, but it's mine, and nobody's stubborn whim is going to make me sell it!"

"A jug that only a mother could love!" Mike quipped grimly, and looked as if he'd like to smash the thing. The atmosphere was distinctly strained when they left, a little later. Donna dropped into the big chair and glared at the vase.

"I will not!" she fumed. "He's just being stubborn and—and—something. Stubborn. Well, I can be a mule, too!" Then she thought, shrewdly, "If I give in and sell it now, he'll think I did it just to trap him—which would be true—and he wouldn't like that, either!"

While she was still arguing with herself, the doorbell rang. Donna glanced at her watch—ten o'clock! When she opened the door, somewhat cautiously, two burly men stood there, reeking of liquor, their attitude plainly threatening.

"Is Mike Shail here?" the larger of the two asked.

"No," Donna said, and made up her mind to scream if they tried to come in. "He was here with some friends, but they left a few minutes ago."

"Every time I catch up with him, he's with friends!" the big man growled. "Well, I got a friend can take care of his friend!"

The other man looked into the room over Donna's shoulder. "Don't seem to be nobody there now," he conceded. "They must've left while we was in the bar." Donna swung the door wide so they could see there was really nobody there. Then, while they still hesitated, she stepped back inside and closed the door firmly—and locked it.

Well, my goodness! Mike had mentioned firing a man named Sneeden, who had later threatened to "get" him. The tall man must be Sneeden. She vaguely remembered seeing the report Mike had sent to Mr. Oliver. The man had been selling to small stores above the list prices, and pocketing the difference.

He was a huge man, too. Besides, his companion looked as if he had a gun in his pocket. She hoped they wouldn't be able to find out where Mike lived. She'd have to warn him, tomorrow!

MIKE RANG her doorbell promptly at seven the next morning, but she was ready for him. He stowed her basket in the back of his sleek coupe, and they were off. The day went like a dream—a blue-and-gold, spring-scented dream. At the Agards' place, Mike admired Nels' flourishing vegetable garden, and looked thoughtfully at the vacant acre just beyond the fence....

Nels and Anna and small Karen rode in the Agard car, and Jimmy, aged eight, insisted upon riding in Mike's car. Which was all right, because he had to sit by the window, and that put Donna in the middle where her shoulder rested comfortably against Mike's.

They stopped often—to take color pictures of the flowers, of the mountains, and of each other. Mike, it seemed, was as much a color-camera fiend as Nels. He took at least half a dozen pictures of Donna—because her red-plaid shirt and the red ribbons on her pigtails made nice spots of color, he explained casually. He even allowed Donna, after much coaching and many warnings, to take a picture of him.

When Donna told him about the two men who were looking for him, his mouth went grim, but only for a minute. He said, "I knew they were following me; and I've given them the slip hoping Sneeden would get over

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his peeve and I wouldn't have to turn him in. It looks as if I'd have to get tough. Don't you worry your cute little head about it, though." Then he kissed her.

For the next several miles, Donna was a person bemused and bewitched. Mike was singing plaintive little Irish love songs, and that was perfect, too. He kissed me!—Donna thought, over and over. True, it was just a light, quick kiss, just a breath of a kiss across her cheek, but her heart quickened and a soft little smile curved her mouth.

Presently he launched into a song she knew, and she lifted her clear, sweet voice to join his.

Mike reached over and took her hand in his firm, warm grip, resting their clasped hands on his knee as they sang. When the song was done, he flashed a smile at her. "This is the way it ought to be," he said softly. "This is fun."

"Yes," she agreed breathlessly, and looked up at him just as his smile twisted into cynicism. He released her hand to maneuver the car around a hairpin turn, and kept both hands on the wheel after that.

"There's a difference," he said finally, "between the way a girl seems and the way she really is. Even you," he finished with a touch of bitterness. "Even you," he repeated softly, almost regretfully.

Before Donna could answer him, before she could recover from his quick shift from tenderness to cynicism, he braked the car and was out of it, absorbed in taking a picture of a brilliant patch of wind-poppies. And when they went on again, Donna said nothing. What was the use?

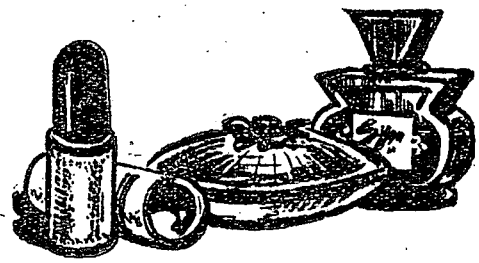
The day was spoiled, though. When they stopped for lunch beside a little stream in the Tehachapi mountains, where sunlight filtered through the branches of pale-leaved sycamores, Donna made a point of helping Anna and supervising the children—and avoiding Mike, who finally wandered off with Nels.

IT WAS LATE when they got back to the apartment after dropping Jimmy off at home. Mike took her to the door, silent and brooding.

"Goodnight," Donna said quietly, "It's been a lovely day, Mike."

"Yes, it has," he agreed absently, his dark eyes on her wind-whipped hair curling in little tendrils around her forehead, her small face with its pert nose slightly sunburned—

Suddenly his arms were around her, his lips against her mouth. And for a moment, Donna's whole world stood still. Finally Mike lifted his head and looked down at her, long and searchingly.



"He really does care!" she thought dizzily. "Now he'll say it!"—but he didn't. He just said, "Goodnight, Donna Reade," and went away.

But her heart floated once more on its own private pink cloud, and, as she showered and got ready for bed, she hummed over and over the refrain of a tender Irish love song!

THE WEEK FLEW by on dancing feet. Mike no longer went into Los Angeles for lunch, but formed the habit of joining Nels and Donna, or sometimes just Donna, at the lunchroom across the street from the plant. And, just to cover up his lapse Sunday night, he made a point of tossing off some slighting remark about the Wedgwood vase every time he saw her, if nothing more than just to call her Miss Wedgwood. Truly, the man was obsessed, and Donna alternated

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between tremulous happiness and helpless fury. Sometimes she wanted to say, "I love you, you big red-headed goon! Stop fooling around and kiss me again!" And sometimes she wanted to throw her plate at him!

On Friday, Mike poked his head into her office to say, "The pictures are ready. Transparencies. Want to see them?"

"Oh, yes!" Donna said, hoping her eagerness would be construed as purely artistic. "Look, I'll call Nels and Anna, and all three of you come to my place for dinner tomorrow night. I'll dig up a screen somewhere."

"You don't dig up screens, my good woman," Mike informed her loftily. "I'll bring my own screen and projector." His head vanished, and Donna went back to work.

She spent Saturday afternoon in a frenzy of house-cleaning and cooking. By the time her doorbell rang at six-thirty, her small apartment, always neat, was simply glittering, and the tempting fragrance of spice cake drifted through the rooms. She had put her drop-leaf table by the front windows, and set it with her china and silver and crystal.

Mike said "Mmmm!" as he came in. "Smells good. A career girl who can cook and everything." His dark eyes swept the room approvingly, then came back to Donna. She'd put on a hostess gown of heavy white crepe, with a gold belt, and her brown hair was swept to the top of her head and fastened with bright gold pins.

"Are we going to eat a roast, or you?" Mike murmured. "You look good enough to—"

The arrival of Nels and Anna right then—darn it—cut short his compliment. "Your table looks lovely," Anna said, smiling with understanding. Nels was positively beaming, for some reason.

"Donna," he began, "did you know—"

"Shut up," Mike said cheerfully. "Don't give away secrets. Shut up."

"Okay," Nels muttered, but he kept right on beaming.

The dinner was a huge success. The roast was just right, the salad stayed crisp, the cake was perfect. It was fun. It was better than that—it was heaven!

Until Donna and Anna cleared the table and the men were pushing furniture around to set up the screen and projector. Then Mike spoiled everything.

"Donna," he called, "can I throw out this blue thing here by the door? It's in the way."

"Oh, Mike!" Donna wailed, "Don't start that again!"

SHE CAME into the living room, and suddenly the tension was electric between them. Mike faced her, his fists jammed into the pockets of his coat, his dark eyes pleading.

Donna wanted to cry out, "Darling, I love you! I'll get rid of the vase—" But instinctively she knew that, even if she did, it wouldn't solve anything. He'd begin to wonder if she hadn't been prompted by the money involved, or something. He'd just have to get rid of his obsession—

"I haven't convinced you, have I?" he said slowly, and Donna shook her head. Mike slumped, and his face went white beneath the tan. He turned to help Nels, then, not saying anything more.

This was the end of everything, Donna thought hopelessly—

Anna was still clattering things in the kitchen, and Nels said, "Excuse me," hurriedly and went to join her. Probably to ask for advice, Donna thought miserably. Poor darlings! They'd certainly tried hard!

The doorbell sounded again, this time a short, vicious jangle. Donna moved numbly toward the door and opened it without thinking—and there were the two men who had come the other night asking for Mike!

"Don't tell me he ain't here this time!" the taller one snarled, and they

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pushed past her into the room. The short man made for the kitchen door, pulling a gun from his pocket as he went. Nels appeared in the doorway, but stopped short at sight of the gun.

"Well, Sneeden?" Mike said coolly, as the tall man stood looking him over as if debating where to hit him first.

"I aim to teach you a lesson, you young twirp!" Sneeden said harshly, and moved toward Mike, who was standing absolutely still. The man would make two of Mike. He was huge, with the shoulders of a stevedore and the long arms of an anthropoid ape. He would kill Mike!

With blind desperation, Donna seized the only weapon in sight—the heavy Wedgwood vase—and swung it with all her strength against the back of the man's head. The vase shattered into a thousand fragments—and the Sneeden man just shook his head, annoyed. His hat-brim had broken the force of the blow! One great hand slapped backward at her, sending her to the floor by sheer weight.

She heard Mike's yell of pure rage, and the satisfying crack of his fist against Sneeden's heavy jaw. The gunman turned his head for a startled second—and that was all Nels needed. The two men hit the floor almost together.

There was a good bit of confusion, then, for a few minutes, while Anna called the police and Nels shooed curious neighbors away. And Mike—

Mike was kneeling beside her, cradling her in his arms, crooning to her, "Darling, are you hurt? If you're hurt, I'll take that animal apart. Darling, you do love me, don't you?"

"I've always loved you," Donna said crossly. "You were just too busy with that—that—"

"It took me a long time to understand you," Mike admitted humbly. "I'm sorry about the vase, honestly I am. You broke it over the man's head because you thought I was in danger—"

"And a lot of good it did!" Donna said bitterly. "Besides," she took a deep breath, "you're a lot more important to me, even though you'd never believe it!"

He smiled down at her, a tender smile with no cynicism in it anywhere. "Look," he said gently, pushing back the tumbled curls from her forehead, "Nels was going to tell you I finally bought that land next to his place. Would you marry me and live out there, Donna? If you can forgive me for misjudging you—about the vase, I mean. I'll never argue with you about anything you want to own, ever again!"

"Anything *we* own," Donna corrected him, all her love shining in her eyes. "Of course I'll marry you," she whispered. "You're all I've ever really wanted!"

"By golly!" Nels murmured, beaming at his wife. "They finally made it!"

But Donna and Mike didn't hear. They were too busy....

THE END

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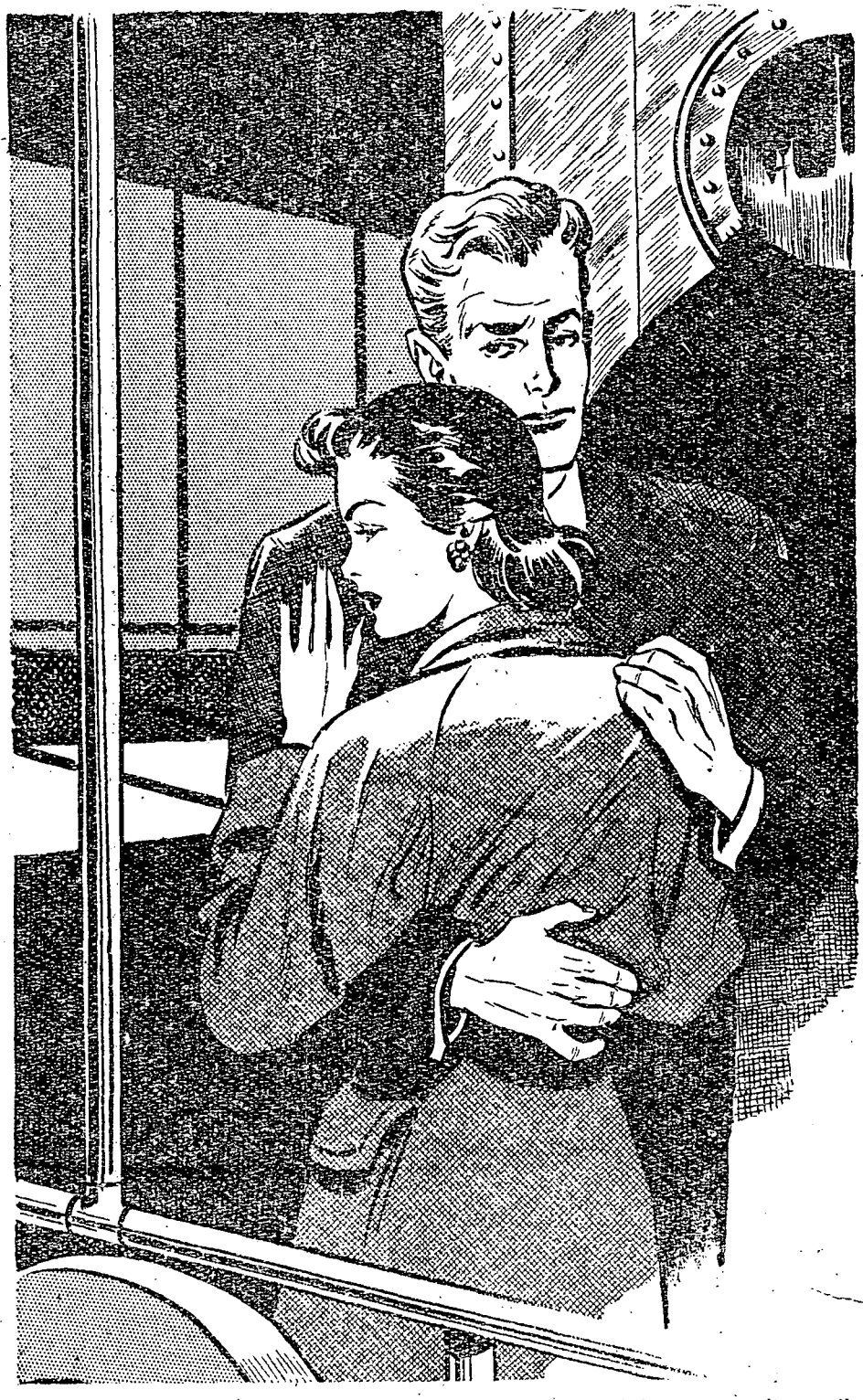

"I don't want us here like this," she said miserably. "Hiding, pretending . . ."

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LIZA and the TORCH

In a way, she owed her freedom to Kelly.

by Marion Glasgow

LIZA DUFF, airborne, felt a pleasant quiver inside her as the mist-shrouded Pacific slid from view. Bits of turquoise were scattered in among the houses below—the swimming pools of Beverly Hills and San Fernando Valley. She watched until the tiny shadow of the big plane was gliding over barren hills before she settled back to face the other passengers.

One of the last to come aboard, she rode facing the rear. The elderly man to her right slept peacefully. The couple facing her were intent on their reading and across the aisle a gentlemen's foursome played cards. In the seat back of the men a young mother held a baby girl who heckled her brother by grabbing his hair, his nose, his ear. He dodged expertly and grinned at Liza.

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"I been on a plane before," he shouted. Encouraged by Liza's smile, he held up four fingers. "I'm this many old."

Liza winked and smiled to show her appreciation and found herself staring into the eyes of the young man who sat back of the boy. He was a rugged, tanned individual with a hateful crew haircut and dark eyes that lingered on her as if negligently. Liza flushed, her smile disappeared and she opened her purse to search for something—anything.

"My name's Billy," the small boy yelled. "What's your name?" His mother put a stop to that and Liza took from her purse the list she had scribbled last night when Mrs. Osborne telephoned her from Vancouver. The list read: wool suit, top coat, small felt hat, blouses, sweater, dressing gown and so on.

"I have to bring Howard home," Eloise Osborne had said, referring to her husband. "It isn't that I mind giving up the rest of the trip, it isn't that I mind nursing Howard, but I can't keep an eye on Howard and Diane at the same time. She wants to finish the trip with Gilbert and you're to make it a proper threesome."

The promotion from house-chaperone to daughter-chaperone at two o'clock in the morning left Liza breathless.

"You mean I'm to walk out on my summer job?"

"Isn't a trip to Alaska more educational than selling beach togs at Summerton's?"

"Why, yes," said Liza weakly. "Is Mr. Osborne really so ill?"

"Food poison," sighed Mrs. Osborne. "He'll be fine as soon as he gets into his own bed and has some home cooking. He wanted to send for his sister, Agnes, as chaperone but Diane wouldn't have it. As Gilbert pointed out, a girl sixteen needs someone young and active to keep up with her."

Liza's heart sang at the knowledge that Gil wanted her along on the trip. Gil, a law student, and a distant relative of Howard Osborne's had gone along on the trip to help with the driving and to make an agreeable companion for Diane. In all the weeks they had been gone Liza had heard nothing from him, though Diane had sent postal cards from Sun Valley, Yellowstone, Jackson Hole and Banff Springs, all of them addressed to one or the other of her pets, the dog, the cat, the parakeets or the angel fish.

"I'll telephone our lawyer, Mr. Hartley, to get you on the twelve-fifteen plane," Mrs. Osborne said. "Look through my things, Liza, bring anything you need." She reeled off a list of the things Liza would need and she ended with a warning: "Don't miss that plane."

Liza had made the plane all right, though the deliberate timing of Mr. Hartley, the lawyer, almost drove her wild. He did not approve of the Osbornes sending for Liza in this unorthodox manner. In his opinion the Osbornes should fly Diane home with them and let Gilbert Parker drive back with the car. The Alaska trip would keep. It was high time the Osbornes took a firm hand with young Diane. Hadn't she caused them enough misery last summer when she ran off and married that mechanic? She wasn't out of that mess yet, but here they were letting her wander off with a couple of irresponsible students.

Liza said nothing, knowing that Mr. Hartley was aware of the fact that she was an adult twenty, eminently responsible, with her junior year at the university behind her.

BILLY'S HIGH voice caught Liza's attention. He stood up in his seat, reciting to the young man back of him. The young man was not bored, but his smile, somehow, seemed to include Liza and she turned again to look out the window.

She got a close-up of the broad Columbia River before the plane settled

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down gently on one of the Portland runways and taxied up near the main entrance. Filing out behind the other passengers, Liza saw that Billy and his sister were both asleep.

"Wouldn't you know they'd both raise sand the whole trip and then fall in a hunk the minute we have to get off?" said their mother.

"I'll take the baby," Liza offered.

The mother handed the child over with a sigh of relief and reached overhead for her purse and small bag. Liza went on down the aisle, the baby's head wobbling against her shoulder. A backward glance showed that Billy's friend had picked him up and joined the procession.

The boy's father, red-faced and excited, met them at the gate. "Am I glad to see you!" He beamed at his wife. "The car's right over there." He took Billy and stood him on his feet. "Wake up, fella, you're too big to be carried." He smiled at Liza and her companion. "Thanks a million, folks. Guess you must have kids of your own to—"

Billy's mother cut in hastily, "They haven't even met."

Her husband guffawed. "Guess we can fix that." He nodded from Liza to her companion. "Miss Jones, meet Mr. Smith." His quick grin matched Billy's. "Can't thank you enough, folks."

And he strutted off with his little family as pleased as a bantam rooster showing off his flock.

"My name's Kelly Leighton," said Liza's companion casually. "I saw your name on the stewardess' log. Do they call you Beth, Betty or—"

"Liza, but I don't think my boy friend would approve."

"You mean it's his pet name or something?"

"I mean he doesn't approve of chance acquaintances."

"Stuffy old bird."

"Oh, quite the contrary."

"You aren't by any chance headed for the fishing grounds along the Campbell River?" Kelly Leighton asked.

"No." Liza hesitated but it wasn't in her to withhold the fascinating information. "Tuesday we sail for Alaska on the Prince Charles."

"You and your boy friend?"

"Let us not get confused," said Liza stiffly. "There will be three in our crowd."

"But there are only two of us now," he said calmly. "We may as well be friends—temporary friends at least."

"Excuse me," said Liza, "I think I'll go inside and pick up a maga—" She paused and eyed him blankly. It occurred to her that Mr. Hartley, the lawyer, had not passed over the twenty dollars which Mrs. Osborne had mentioned as pocket money for the trip. She remembered the lone dollar bill in her purse with a sinking sensation. "Think I'll just get in a little exercise," she said.

SHE TURNED from Kelly Leighton and walked to the far end of the cement strip. When she returned he had gone and she continued to pace up and down until the loud-speaker herded all passengers back to the plane. This time she had a better seat, facing forward, where she could look at the back of Kelly Leighton's head instead of having to face him. He was one of the last aboard and as he passed her seat, he reached over and put a pile of magazines in her lap, not pausing to say a word, not giving her a chance to thank him. The stringy blonde who sat next to the aisle giggled.

"You want me to trade places with your friend?" she asked.

"Oh, no," said Liza hurriedly and she spread out the magazines for the blonde to take her choice. "Any of these interest you?"

"The movie one, if it's all the same to you."

Liza passed over the magazine and

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tried not to total up the amount Kelly Leighton had spent for the collection. Gil always said it was vulgar to think of nothing but money values. Still, with only that one dollar bill and a scattering of silver in her purse, she was low-brow enough to worry about buying a snack to eat at the Seattle airport. And what about taxi fare in Vancouver if Gil or the Osbornes didn't show up? Vulgar or not, Liza wished that she had fewer magazines and more money.

They rode above the clouds most of the way to Seattle. Miles and miles of clouds with only an occassional hole through which she could see the green country below. There was the smell of rain in the air as they left the plane at the Seattle-Tacoma airport and the runways showed wet streaks from a recent shower.

"Beautiful building, isn't it?" Kelly Leighton came up beside Liza. "We have a couple of hours to kill before the Vancouver plane. My seat mate and I are taking a taxi into town to see what it's like and we thought perhaps—"

"I wouldn't dare," said Liza quickly. "I might miss the plane."

"Told him not to hope," Kelly Leighton said with a grin.

She felt rather lonely in the big modern building as she watched the two men drive off. She went upstairs to the coffee shop and cautiously ordered a cinnamon roll and a glass of milk. Later she strolled around and around the circular driveway at the front of the building watching the dark clouds pile up in the north.

THE FACT that Gil preferred her company to that of Aunt Agnes filled her with confidence. He was the important man in her life, no question about it. He was Gilbert Parker, the boy who had lived with his grandmother in the big house on the corner, hidden from her own modest home by a barrier of accacia and eucalyptus and a high cement wall. At first he merely climbed one of the trees, let himself down on top of the wall and lay there watching Liza feed the rabbits, the chickens, the ducks. The actions of the ducks pointed out his hiding place at once, but Liza played the game his way. She pretended she didn't know he was there as she went about her other chores. There were three younger brothers to keep out of mischief, not counting the baby sister in the big buggy who slept most of the time.

Gil, a long-legged boy of nine finally tied a rope to an accacia limb and let himself down into the yard, revealing the splendor of his cowboy boots, his scarlet kerchief and his wide-brimmed hat. In the manner of an indulgent adult he let her brothers handle his guns and his lariat.

He looked Liza over carefully from the crown of her dark hair down to her jersey and blue jeans.

"Go scrub your face," he said roughly, "and we'll play I'm Two-Gun Topper."

When she returned, dripping from the hydrant, he indicated her fascinated little brothers with a sweep of his shiny guns.

"Round up them cattle-rustlin' varmits and we'll turn 'em over to the sheriff."

The three little boys were imprisoned within the imaginary walls of the sand box and from there on out Gil teamed with Liza in all their backyard games. Gil came secretly and he left secretly. On the street he scarcely glanced at Liza. She quite understood that he was ashamed of playing with a little girl who was so much younger than himself.

Gil was off at military school when his grandmother died. The house and

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grounds on the corner were neglected. The for-sale sign on the front lawn became weather beaten and lopsided. Then, one April afternoon when Liza got off the bus, carrying an armful of school books, she saw a car in the Parker's driveway and a young man came striding through the weeds of the lawn to meet her.

"I've sold the house." It was Gilbert Parker, very grown-up, smiling in that engaging way as though they had parted only yesterday. "Didn't get much for the house but at least it's off my neck. Most of the furniture goes with it, all except a few good pieces I want to put in storage." He took her books from her. "I drove down here to see you."

Liza's throat was so tight she couldn't say a word.

He glanced down at the titles of her books. "Hm, in rather deep aren't you?" he said.

"Second year Junior College," said Liza.

"Then what?"

"I'll clerk at Bingham's. I worked there all last summer."

"You ought to finish school."

She passed it off with an embarrassed little shrug. Where would she get the tuition?

"How are your grades?" he asked.

"B average."

"That ought to do it," said Gil with a confident bob of his head. "You can get in at the university, I'll help you." His eyebrows shot up and he laughed in a knowing way. "Believe me, I know all the angles."

"You really think I can make my own way?"

"No foolin', honey, with me pointing the way, you can't miss." He smiled and nodded toward the house. "Come on and help me pick out the things to put in storage. That empty house haunts me."

IT WAS Gilbert who got her out of Brassville just as it was Gilbert who introduced her to the Osbornes. Gilbert was back of every nice thing that had ever happened to her and she shivered deliciously at the thought of meeting him at the Vancouver airport.

But Gilbert was not at the airport to meet her. By the time Kelly Leighton had helped her through customs the mist outside had turned to a drizzle. She stood beside her luggage at the curbing, waiting for the airport bus to jockey itself into a position to take on passengers, when the Osborne's car raced up. The door flew open and Diane Osborne, enveloped in a white raincoat, rushed over to Liza.

"Darling!" She gave Liza a fierce hug, her small, lovely face smiling out from the deep cowled hood. "The family wanted to send for Aunt Agnes but I said, quote, 'If I must have a spy, she's got to be spry. Give me Liza or don't give at all.'"

"Hi, Daffy-Duff," came Gil's warm, laughing voice back of Liza. She found him smiling boyishly at her, bareheaded in the rain, the collar of his coat turned up high around his ears, the bright edge of a muffler showing. "Which bags are yours?"

Liza pointed them out, aware that Kelly Leighton was watching her, yet unwilling to draw Gil's fire by introducing him. She was hurried inside the car and barely had time to run the window down and wave an awkward, back-handed farewell before Gil was driving off along the dark, gleaming street.

"Who was that for?"

Trust Gil not to miss a thing.

"Just a fisherman I met on the plane," said Liza. "He's going to fish on the Campbell River."

"Did you have a nice trip?" Diane hugged her arm affectionately. "Any news from home?"

That was a subtle approach for Diane. Liza had expected her to come right out and ask if there was any word from Dick Parker, the other half of the Arizona elopement. Diane was

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always direct and outspoken. The first time she met Liza she had made her position perfectly clear. "We can't be friends, Liza. All this talk about your coaching me in math and Spanish is so much tripe. You're really a substitute jailer when the family isn't home. If you must know, I got married last summer in Yuma and Daddy flew over and yanked me home. Dick was furious because I told him I was eighteen when I was sixteen and father swore he'd have me put in Juvenile Hall if Dick tried to see me before the annulment. Now no one trusts me to cross the street without a chaperone and I don't like it. I just don't like it!"

IT WAS impossible to look at Diane now and think of her as the bitter, restless girl Liza had met last fall. Diane's smooth young face was free of care and quick to smile. Had this summer trip been such a success? Was it possible she had cooled off on Dick Parker in six short weeks?

"Sorry," said Liza. "No news from home."

"How about the birds, the pup, the fish?"

"Lost an angel fish," said Liza regretfully.

"Think nothing of it," said Diane. "We darned near lost Daddy. First time he's ever been sick and he still doubts he'll pull through. It's certainly rough on mother."

They found Mrs. Osborne standing by the window in her hotel room, staring out at the rain. She was tall and angular, very tailored and attractive in her tweed suit and English walkers.

"Here's little old Liza," Diane cried gayly. She swooped across the room and gave her mother an ecstatic hug. "Everything's working out just right."

"Sh, your daddy's resting." Mrs. Osborne turned to welcome Liza with warm affection. "Such short notice," she apologized in a whisper, motioning for Gil to close the door to the adjoining room. "We're so glad you could make it."

"What's going on in there?" Homer Osborne demanded from the next room. "Come on in here where I can hear you."

He was in bed, propped up with pillows. His long, thin face was pale, his lips had a bluish tinge, he looked old enough to be Diane's grandfather. Ignoring the others, he spoke to Liza.

"Well, young lady, we're counting on you to keep Diane in line. One word from you and she gets shipped home to us by the nearest plane." One long finger came up and stabbed in Gil's direction. "He's your banker and business manager; one word from him and both get sent home."

"Spies, spies," said Diane laughingly. She pointed to the tray beside his bed and drew her brows down, imitating his scowl. "You did not eat your cinnamon toast."

"I drank the milk."

"You licked off the sugar and the butter!"

"The toast stuck in my throat," complained Mr. Osborne and it was plain that Diane had not succeeded in communicating any of her excited gaiety to him. "Nothing tastes right."

"I see a popcorn vender down on the corner," said Mrs. Osborne from the window. "Remember, Howard, how you used to enjoy popcorn at the races?"

"Popcorn?" Mr. Osborne ran his tongue over the word as though he were tasting it. "I'll try it," he decided. "Gilbert, suppose you go down and get three or four bagsfull. Have the man drown mine in butter."

"Yes, sir."

"Come on, Liza," urged Diane, "let's go along."

Out in the corridor she hurried ahead to ring for the elevator and Liza felt Gil's hands on her shoulders as he drew her back against him for a brief secret caress.

"Um, sweet," he said, in a low voice

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that thrilled her. "Isn't this the darndest set up?"

"Dream stuff," said Liza.

Mr. Osborne ate two bags of the popcorn and that seemed to mark the end of his aversion to food. The next morning he had a coddled egg and toast for breakfast and felt well enough to send his wife off with the girls for a day of shopping.

Chapter Two

THAT EVENING Liza stood with Diane and Gil on the promenade deck of the Prince Charles, waiting to move out into the Gulf of Georgia. Mrs. Osborne stood on the dock veranda, crowded in among the other people who had come to see the Prince Charles off. She waved her scarf occasionally. "To show there's still life in the old girl," Diane remarked. The mist came down like fine rain and the railing was so wet they dared not lean on it. The men on the open deck below were calling parting messages to relatives and well-wishers on the dock. Someone edged into the cramped space back of Liza, resting a hand on the wet railing. She glanced over her shoulder and found herself looking into Kelly Leighton's dark eyes. At that moment the ship's public address system came on the air with the strains of Aloha, and Diane broke out in embarassed laughter because the island song sounded so out of place in that cold, bleak setting.

Liza turned briefly to Kelly Leighton. "You call this the Campbell River?" she demanded in a fierce whisper.

"I was headed for the Campbell," he assured her earnestly. "It was just a fluke that I got on this ship. I telephoned from Portland and found that some old duck named Osborne had a heart attack or something and had to give up his reservation."

"Oh, no!" wailed Liza.

Diane, thinking she was protesting against the music, turned and threw a sympathetic arm around her shoulders. Three warning hoots on the Prince Charles' whistle made them clutch each other and when Liza glanced again in Kelly's direction, he had gone.

Even as she slept that night she had a consciousness of motion and lapping water. And in the morning when she was awakened by the pleasant sound of the breakfast chimes, she opened her eyes and saw the round, greenish reflection of the water dancing on the ceiling of the bedroom.

"Hey, Diane, wake up!"

Diane snuggled deeper under the blue satin puff. Liza stood at one of the portholes a moment watching the water and the distant land where the forest came down to the water line. She shivered in the cool air and began hurriedly to dress. Breakfast with Gil, her heart sang. Breakfast with Gil.

"Wake up Diane." She shook the younger girl's shoulder. "You barely have time to dress for breakfast."

Diane groaned and stretched, looking very young with her cheeks rosy and her brown hair all tousled.

"I think I'm coming to," she said.

Liza caught up her coat and purse. "I'll be out on deck," she said. "I'm afraid I'll miss something."

She loved the slight motion of the ship, she loved the thought of being at sea. She stood on the deck watching the sun dispel the misty greyness from the shoreline. She smiled excitedly when Gil came outside to stand beside her.

"My first morning at sea," she said. "Thanks to you."

He merely nodded, looking darkly out over the grey blue water. As she watched him, her heart sank.

"Aren't you happy?" she asked, leaving the "to have me here?" part unspoken.

HE SMILED at her with a faint bitterness, but he was not really seeing her. He seemed remote as though his thoughts were far away. He

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was always working some angle, as he called it. Possibly Mr. Osborne had not come through with an offer that Gil had anticipated.

"Haven't things worked out for you with Mr. Osborne?" she asked.

He shrugged. It was no answer, he merely let her know that he did not want to discuss it. She had the curious feeling that he wanted nothing from her except a comforting silence. No conversation, please, no thinking! A wild upsurge of unhappiness made her turn away from him. She bumped into someone and felt herself caught by a steadying hand. Kelly Leighton murmured a quiet, "Watch it!" before he turned to open the heavy door for her. She heard Gil's pleasant, "Just a moment, Liza, let me introduce my roommate, Kelly Leighton. Mr. Leighton, Miss Duff."

Liza's impulse was to turn and escape. But the long, slow look from Kelly Leighton's dark eyes held her, reassured her.

"You'll excuse us," she said. "We're on our way to breakfast."

"Carry on," he said, using Gil's pet expression, picked up from the room steward. "Small ship, small world."

When she was inside with Gil he said, "You needn't snub the man, Liza. He's a solid citizen, you know. Owns a flock of real estate in Santa Monica. Who knows, he may need a bright young lawyer one of these days."

"And who am I to sneer," Liza said lightly.

"Exactly." Gil shook his head in a dejected sort of way. "There's nothing wrong with us that a million bucks wouldn't cure, eh, Liza? Ah!" His face took on that familiar bright look as Diane came down the corridor to meet them. "How's Blue Eyes this morning?"

"Hungry," said Diane, reaching out to pat a strand of Liza's hair back in place. "You're wind-blown, honey. Most becoming. Lead on, Gil, straight to the ham and eggs."

Gil's playing up to Diane did not trouble Liza. That was merely a part of his job. The sense of the strangeness of the ship, the stimulation of sitting across from Gil, the luxury of being served her milk and toast and eggs with no effort on her part, was delightful.

Gil and Diane appointed her the official letter writer. She was to produce a lengthy letter to be airmailed to the Osbornes from the next port, Prince Rupert.

"No one wants to hear from me," wailed Liza. "They want to hear from you, Diane."

"Don't argue," said Diane. "You're elected."

The others went out on deck, complaining because the sun had ducked behind grey clouds. Liza remained in the lounge, working on that stuffy letter. What with day dreaming and nibbling on an old mint she found in her purse, she was on the second folder when an elderly, professional-looking man dashed in from outside. He ran down the corridor and reappeared a moment later carrying a small black bag. He hurried out on deck and Liza followed him to see who needed medical attention. There he stood, the black bag open at his feet, holding a light meter up to the sky. A shaft of sunlight had broken through the overcast and he had rushed to get his camera before the sun disappeared.

"Hey, Liza, come and play shuffleboard with us," Diane called. "Kelly and I will play you and Gil."

"I don't know how."

Diane thrust a long-handled cue in her hand. "Pretend you're mopping the floor with a new gimmick. See, like this." She made a low graceful sweep with her cue to demonstrate. "Come on. I've got to practice, I'm going to sign up for the tournament."

Diane's welcome was backed by Kelly's smile and Gil motioned Liza to his side with proprietory gestures.

"Come on, Daffy-Duff, we'll slaughter 'em."

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LIZA FOUND the game wildly hilarious. A slight rise in the deck sent the disks anywhere except where they were aimed. Her lack of skill was no handicap. There were gay arguments about whether the disks touched division lines or not, with Diane and Gil moving the opponent's disks with sly pokes.

"Don't be such cheaters," Liza protested.

Diane and Gil ignored her but Kelly tilted his brows at her, as if to say "What goes on, eh?" and his smile was so charming and puzzled at the same time that she felt quick sympathy for him. How was an outsider to figure out Liza's devotion to Gil when he was so attentive to Diane? Liza knew the answer and she laughed to herself. No matter what the surface appearances, she trusted Gil to work out their future in the very best possible way. Gil had to do things in his own secret, roundabout way.

Having accepted so much from the Osbornes, Liza was inclined to trail around after Diane as though the girl were a predatory Pekingese hung with blue ribbons. That first day Liza watched Gil and Diane's faces to be sure they were happy and entertained. But when the cruise director began calling on Diane to help organize the young people's shuffleboard and ping pong tournaments, Liza relaxed and left the trailing to Gil.

It wasn't until late afternoon of the second day that Liza had a moment alone with Gil. She felt that he had been avoiding her but now he came and sank low in the deck chair beside her, as if to shut out the sight of Diane and her teen-aged companions intent and noisy over the jockey races going on in the glass-walled card room.

"Gad," he said. "Am I frustrated!"

She didn't see how he could feel frustrated with her there beside him.

"Diane's strenuous," she said gently.

He nodded. "Keeping up with her is worse than chasing rabbits. If this keeps up she'll kill me off. We race from the engine room to the boat deck; we play games. Then she had me dancing with all that young stuff."

"Ha!" said Liza. "Give you a pretty girl and an audience and you're in heaven."

"She treats me like her old guntotin' grandaddy," complained Gil.

"So that's why you had the Osbornes send for me," teased Liza. "You wanted someone around who thinks you're young and charming."

Gil laughed. "You're a darned sight cozier than Aunt Agnes," he said. "Gosh, Liza, if either one of us had a nickle to rub against the other, couldn't we have fun?"

"I'm having fun," said Liza.

Gil looked away. Abruptly he got up and pulled her to her feet. "Come on," he said, "let's join the young stuff and keep out of mischief."

Liza hid her disappointment under a smile. I can wait, she told herself. I've waited this long and I can wait some more. He loves me, I know he does.

LATE THAT evening he asked her to meet him on the shuffleboard deck.

"We'll talk," he said. "Diane's determined to see that darned movie."

Liza sat for a few minutes with Diane, watching the small screen, wanting to be sure Diane was interested in the picture before she left her. She was late and she ran up the two flights of stairs. Breathless and eager she hurried out on deck and almost ran into Gil before she saw him. She checked herself, fumbling with the collar of her coat, and tried to look composed.

"The stairs," she said. "I'm all out of breath."

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"You're my darling," he said. He took her hand and they stood shoulder to shoulder looking out at the dark sea. "I mean the way you build me up to Diane and all." His voice deepened. "It's Osborne's idea that I'm to get her mind off that grease monkey at home. It's part of my job."

"Of course," Liza agreed.

"You're sweet." He unbuttoned her coat and slipped his hand under its thick folds and drew her to him. Her body yielded against him in a sort of weak and delicious surrender. "None of them half as sweet as you."

Before he kissed her he lifted his head, to be sure no one was watching. Somehow, that alert gesture, so beyond her own blind eagerness, made her turn from him. She felt that he was merely flattered by her own emotion, that he was leading her on to soothe his own tender spirit that had been bruised by Diane's indifference.

"I've done nothing the whole trip but think of you," he said, his tone low and tender.

Not a word from him in six weeks and yet, with a couple of endearing words, he had her as helpless as any moon-eyed innocent. A baffling resentment rose in her, against him, against herself, and she moved away.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't want us here, like this—"

"Like what?"

"Hiding, pretending."

He moved closer and she retreated a step.

"Who's pretending?" He sounded hurt, offended. "You know I've always wanted the best of everything for you. Who talked you into going to the university? Who got the Osbornes to take you in? Who suggested you for this trip?"

Liza stared miserably into the darkness. She dared not look at him or touch him for fear she would weaken. She reached out with a finger and traced a wobbly design on the wet railing.

"Liza, look at me."

She shook her head. "I don't want us sneaking."

He chuckled. "You want me to go?" he asked.

"Yes," said Liza, her voice little more than a whisper.

"Liar."

He reached toward her and she moved back. He followed and she turned and ran across the deck and stepped inside where a group stood around the piano requesting favorite songs from the young doctor who played by ear. Across the room, Kelly Leighton stepped inside from the opposite deck and his glance met hers in such a knowing way that she felt sure he had seen her with Gil. Gil had not followed her inside, and now she crossed to Kelly and said brightly, "Aren't you going down to see the movie?"

"And aren't you the busy little bee?" he said sourly. "Flitting from flower to flower."

"You're safe," said Liza. "The cactus type, all thorns."

"The cactus bears wonderful fruit and flowers."

"Ha," said Liza, not believing a word of it. "You will venture down to the movie?"

"Nothing could tempt me less," said Kelly. "A stuffy room, a hard chair and a picture I've seen long ago."

"Don't be so fussy," said Liza. "You're not that old."

She caught his arm and reluctantly he allowed her to take him to the dining room, the movie and Diane.

Chapter Three

THE NEXT morning she was out on the sunny deck with her knitting—the beige, green and red Argyles for Gil's birthday—when Kelly came up with his powerful binocular field glass slung around his neck and insisted that she

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go to the railing to look at the iceberg that floated near the distant shore. He helped Liza bring the glasses to bear and she was fascinated. At close range the ice looked transparent and delicately blue.

When she glanced around, smiling her appreciation, Kelly had his camera all set waiting for her.

"Ah, and you were smiling," he said triumphantly as he wound up the film.

One of the camera fiends came up and offered to get a shot of them together.

"Better take off your hat," the man suggested.

Kelly took off his hat and Liza, self-conscious before the other passengers, said softly, "I'll bet you'd be real pretty if you'd let your hair grow a little longer."

"Want to bet?" He grinned at her. "That's the first nice thing you've ever said to me. Didn't hurt too much did it?"

The sunlight was bright on his dark face, his angular face. He was watching her from under his heavy lashes and his mouth had the familiar, good-natured, half-jeering smile. Liza was annoyed. She felt that he took a delight in singling her out, merely because she avoided him when possible. If it weren't for Gil, she would be extremely nice to him and give him a good scare. She noticed he was quite adept at wriggling away when any of the other feminine passengers got him cornered.

She turned back to the rail, watching the water and Kelly snapped the camera back in its case.

"I've given it a lot of thought, Liza," he said. "That torch you're carrying needs a new wick."

Liza glanced at him sharply to see what he meant. The corners of his mouth were pressed down as if he didn't like what he had said.

"You don't understand," Liza insisted evenly and with a nod of farewell she returned to her deck chair, leaving Kelly to his own unattractive thoughts inward. She had always done things Gil's way with a minimum of coaching. Her present job was to keep Diane happy and out of mischief. Very simple. Let no meddling fisherman come between her, her work and her man.

At the ports, Prince Rupert, Ketchikan and Juneau, Diane rushed Gil and Liza ashore, afraid she would miss the sight-seeing. She always returned with loot, each purchase carefully noted down in Gil's little expense book.

CONDITIONS deteriorated overnight. The morning they docked in Skagway Liza awakened Diane and went out on deck to wait. No Diane. Gil, impatient and hungry, sent Liza to investigate. There Diane lay, stretched out on the bed, her face turned to the wall.

"Hey, Di, don't you want breakfast?"

"No."

Disturbed, Liza went closer, wondering about the damp looking spots on the pillow.

"What's wrong?"

Diane drew an uneven breath. "Go away," she said. "I'm sick of people."

"But why? Have I offended you?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

The voice came muffled, "No one remembered my anniversary."

"You're what?"

"Dick and I—a year ago yesterday."

Liza didn't know what to say. Diane rolled over and eyed her belligerently. Her face was red and puffy, she dabbed at her nose with a wad of a handkerchief.

"Why don't you say it? No one to blame but ourself! Sure, I sold myself that fairy tale stuff: You're in love, Di, you'll get married and live happy ever after. I'm the one who talked Dick into driving to Yuma but Daddy would never believe it. When he threatened to put me in Juvenile Hall, Dick promised he wouldn't see me nor talk to me for a year." Her voice broke and she shook her head at the memory. "I hated Dick for not

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standing up to Daddy and I hated Daddy for treating me like a baby. I said terrible things and I truly wanted to forget Dick.

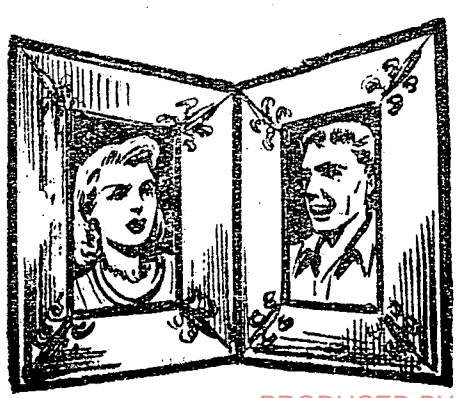
"Mother took me to Cuernevaca till school started and you know yourself, Liza, how hard I studied to make decent grades last winter. Then, just before we came on the trip, I wrote him. Ten pages. Tried to make him see I'd grown up and loved him even though Daddy was determined to get the annulment when it comes up in July.... I gave him our itenirary so he'd know just where I'd be on certain dates. That's why I put up such a squawk when I thought I'd have to go home with Daddy... But I haven't heard a word from Dick, not one word."

"Maybe he figures he has nothing to offer you, Diane."

"He's buying that paint and fender shop." Diane sniffed. "That's where I met him. Smashed the front fender of mother's car and didn't want anyone to know. Dick had the whole thing as good as new by five o'clock. That Sunday I asked him over to the house to swim. He made the other boys seem such infants. I tried to fascinate him right off and I did, too, till Daddy made a mess of things."

"Who made a mess of things?" Liza asked gently.

"Daddy and Dick," Diane insisted. "Look, Di, it's not good weeping over the past. We're going on the train to Whitehorse today. Remember the Mounties, the Yukon, the gold-rush trail! Perk up honey. You've managed to have a good time so far."



"I kept telling myself Dick would write or wire the minute that beastly year was up."

"Starving youself won't help."

Diane sat on the side of the bed. She picked up one of her rose satin bedroom slippers and sat humped over, her eyes studying Liza's face.

"You're just as bad," she said bluntly. "Kidding yourself about—about love."

SHEER SURPRISE stopped Liza cold. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

Diane gave a short laugh of annoyance. "You're not very nice to Kelly, are you? And why? He knows and I know but we don't discuss it. Gil has you fooled and he has Daddy fooled but not little Diane. He makes love to me every chance he gets... There! Now will you kindly step outside before I heave this shoe at you?"

Liza fled in confusion. She felt that Diane's unhappiness had worked on her imagination. Starved for affection, she mistook Gil's conscientious attention for amorous advances and there was nothing Liza could say to dissuade her.

Gil was waiting at the head of the stairway. His patient voice asked how many hours he was expected to wait.

"Now what?"

"She's not hungry," said Liza.

"What's wrong?"

"Her imagination," said Liza. "She thinks everyone's in love with her. Even you, Gil."

"She said that?" He darted a look at Liza, his lips curling in a wry smile of derision. "What did you say?"

"I got out of there." Liza regretted betraying a confidence but she felt that her first loyalty belonged to Gil. "It's just in her own mind, of course, but I doubt Mr. Osborne would be amused if Diane mentioned the matter to him."

Gil swore softly, but he caught himself at once.

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"You're sweet to warn me," he said. "You're the only one who truly understands me."

The side trip to Whitehorse, on the huffing, puffing little train was rough and noisy. The chairs could be turned to face either side of the car and the conductor took a stand by the little black stove in the corner and tried to make himself heard above the clackety-clack of the wheels, pointing out the interesting places along the way. Diane, bored with it all, played chess with Gil on his pocket-sized board which was fitted with magnets to hold the chessmen in place. She glanced up listlessly when Liza pointed out the moose grazing at the edge of a clearing.

She dutifully took pictures of the Indian girl and the dog-drawn sled at Lake Bennet when they stopped for lunch, but she was merely following the crowd. Neither Gil nor Liza could get any response from her. She did the expected thing, empty and passive, as if saying to herself, "I've knocked myself out the whole trip trying to be amusing. Now, I'm sick of the whole thing." And when she played chess with Gil, it was with an intense absorption as though she were trying to escape her own unhappy thoughts.

Even at Whitehorse her sulky state continued. She inspected the hotel room with a resigned sigh. She would scarcely budge from the taxi to view the Indian burial grounds or the Yank-built airport.

There were other tourists in other taxis making the rounds. At the Miles Canyon stop, above the narrowed walls of the Yukon River, Liza left Diane behind while she went with Gil down the hill to the suspension bridge to get some pictures.

WHEN THEY returned they saw Diane off to one side, talking to two sun-burned young men whose looked as though they'd been slept in for weeks.

Diane untered back to the taxi and duck l inside ahead of Liza.

"Who ere you talking to?" Gil asked.

Diane bent over to smack at a mosquito on her ankle.

"A couple of boys from below the border," she said. "They drove straight through and now they have to turn right around and go back again."

"What's the idea?"

"They have just so much time, I suppose."

"Crazy nuts," said Gil disapprovingly.

"Guess it was rugged," Diane agreed. "What's our next stop?"

"Whitehorse Rapids."

"Ha, more mosquitos," said Diane with a laugh. "Watch 'em drop dead when they get a bite of me."

Liza was relieved to see that her sulky, sultry look had disappeared.

They were seated at the horseshoe counter in the little cafe near the hotel when Liza next saw the two young men from below the border.

"Here come those boys from home," Diane whispered. "Let's be nice."

She sat between Liza and Gil. They had finished eating and Gil was trying to attract the waitress' attention to get their check.

The two young men came directly to take the two empty stools next to Liza. They had cleaned up and were freshly shaven. The blond with the grave blue eyes sat next to Liza. The waitress hurried to put water and silver before them. Gil muttered to himself. The young men gave their orders and Diane nudged Liza.

"I hear you've had a rugged trip," Liza ventured, smiling at the young man next to her.

He hesitated and glanced at Diane. He cleared his throat. "My partner and I drove up from Los Angeles," he said quietly. "We took turns driving. Six ply tires. Took two days longer than we figured."

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Gil had his check now and stood waiting for Diane and Liza.

"There's a soft ball game going on between the local boys and the team from Haines," Diane said. "We're going up there to watch."

To Liza's surprise the young man looked at Diane as if the statement were of the utmost importance. "Well," he said, "I guess that's as good a bet as any."

Diane slipped off the stool and murmured a hasty " 'Bye now" to the Californians. The tables in the adjacent room were still crowded with diners from the Prince Charles and Diane paused to speak to a girl who called to her.

Gil turned to Liza. "What's the idea talking to every Tom, Dick and Harry you come across?" he scolded. "Diane's bad enough without any encouragement from you."

The back of his neck looked unusually red as he stalked over to the cashier's desk. Liza wandered on outside, wishing she had never set eyes on the blond young man. She pulled her coat around her, pausing to wait at the edge of the walk.

SHE WATCHED idly as a hunched little man came lurching rapidly along the walk toward her. The evening was cool but he wore no coat. He swayed to a stop in front of Liza and regarded her with bleary eyes.

"I'm Peaceful Paul," he announced loudly, showing blackened teeth in a big grin. "I'm going to pray for you. This very night, I'm going to pray for you."

Liza hesitated, undecided whether to hurry on to the hotel or retreat to the cafe.

"Don't you believe me?" urged Peaceful Paul. "Don't you believe I'll pray for you?"

Diane came out of the cafe followed by Gil. He took one horrified look at Peaceful Paul, then caught Diane's arm and motioned Liza around the drunken old fellow as though they were skirting a garbage dump.

"What's wrong with you?" he demanded of Liza. "Must you talk to every tramp you run across? First that guy at the counter and now talking to this—this—"

It struck Liza as funny. She hadn't opened her mouth once and yet Gil was furious at her.

"Do be quiet, Gil," cried Diane. "You're worse than Daddy. Do let's walk on up to the corner and watch the ball game."

She sounded cross but the eyes that met Liza's were full of laughter.

The bleachers were small and crowded so they sat at a distance from the pitcher's box on one of the logs that were mounted on knee-high posts to encircle two sides of the ball park. Grey and white Husky dogs lay in a dust wallow a few feet away, a distinct hazard to the outfielders. Cars and trucks were parked all around the enclosure, holding spectators who tooted their horns noisily when the local boys made a scoring play.

Gil grew interested in the game and forgot his grievance. Diane rooted for the visiting team with little side remarks to Liza. She found many amusing things to say to Liza, her eyes lifted smilingly to the spectators back of them, and presently Liza discovered that the two young men from California were seated there in a beat-up green sedan. The dark one was sound asleep but the blond was apparently intent on the game.

"What goes on?" Liza asked quietly.

Diane leaned close. "Sh, for heaven's sake don't get Gil started."

"Then stop that flirting."

"I'm not flirting."

"Whatever it is, stop it."

"Yes, ma'am," said Diane meekly and she reached out to pet one of the Huskies that came ambling up to her.

Diane settled down and the next

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time Liza looked around, the green sedan was gone.

The home team won the ball game and the crowd went wild. This was ten-thirty of a Saturday night, time to celebrate. When Gil, Diane and Liza stopped at the hotel desk to get their keys, the night clerk said, "There's three big dances going full swing tonight, if you'd be interested."

Gil glanced at Diane, expecting her to set up a clamour to go, but no, she glanced at the clock meekly and said she guessed she'd go on to bed. Gil was frankly relieved.

"That roommate of mine in yet?" he asked. "Kelly Leighton?"

"He brought in some beautiful fish," said the clerk. "He's over in the restaurant now getting them cooked for his supper."

"Doesn't anyone around here ever go to bed?" Gil asked.

"We do our sleeping in the winter," said the clerk with a grin.

Liza took the bed next to the window and Diane settled down in the other twin bed. She dispensed with the usual nightly chatter. Liza wondered how one little street could be so noisy. A juke box, just below them, was going full tilt. The music jarred right through you when you rested on your side but it merely smashed at your eardrums if you turned on your back. Cars honked, people shouted and laughed below the window or stomped up and down the corridor. Liza decided she would never get to sleep. Never.

Chapter Four

SHE WAS awakened by loud, drunken voices beneath her window. Someone wanted his good old pal, Al, to come on to Tiny's. Al did not care to go to Tiny's and he was loud and vindictive when he expressed his opinion of Tiny.

Liza was chilly. She needed more cover. She glanced over at Diane's dim outline on the other bed and wondered if she, too, wasn't cold. She got up, shook out her own comforter, and spread it over her bed.

"Diane," she said softly. "Want more cover?"

No answer. She moved across the squeaky floor to the foot of Diane's bed and felt for the comforter. It was not there and yet she remembered distinctly seeing it there when they retired.

Liza switched on the light. Instead of Diane, she found the comforter neatly rolled up and tucked under the covers. Liza really went cold. She saw that Diane's clothing was missing, even her hat was gone, Liza pushed her feet into the fur-lined slippers she had bought in Ketchikan. She pulled on her pink woolen robe and stepped out into the hallway. No one in sight. Kelly and Gil shared the next room and she knocked softly on the door. No answer. She knocked again and put her ear against the panel of the door She could hear a soft snoring. Kelly or Gil? She had no way of knowing.

Could it be that Diane, not being able to sleep, had dressed and talked Gil into taking her to one of the dances? Then why the comforter rolled up to look as though she were still in bed?

Liza tiptoed to the main hallway and looked down over the bannister to the lobby. The juke-box music penetrated here too. Kelly sat in a big leather chair, reading a newspaper. That was all she could see, the empty chairs, the covered bird cage, a tall potted plant and Kelly Leighton. She moved cautiously down a step or two, creak, creak, to see if the night clerk was anywhere around.

Kelly glanced up, alert and curious. He watched quietly while she ventured down another step and bent

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double to search the room below. Over in the farthest corner sat Diane, talking earnestly to the harassed young man—the blond from California.

Liza hesitated to call Diane she didn't want to awaken any of the guests. She motioned to Kelly then retreated to the dark shadows of the hallway.

He came leisurely up the stairs, holding the folded paper.

"I was keeping an eye on them," he said a shade apologetic. "Thought I'd better send her back upstairs, but, well...she says they're married."

Liza clutched the bannister. "Married!" she gasped.

"Just a stall, of course. But she was so earnest and the fellow spoke right up and introduced himself, Dick Parker from Los Angeles."

"Oh, no," breathed Liza.

"You have to give him credit. Took plenty of stuff to push that old car of his all the way up here."

Liza crept to the stairs and caught another glimpse of Diane and Dick Parker.

"So that's Dick Parker," she murmured. She turned to Kelly. "They were married last year in Arizona but her father is going to have it annuled."

"Hm, she looks plenty old."

"She's sixteen. Has a birthday next month."

"Sixteen is age of consent in Arizona, I happen to know, I was born in Phoenix."

"You don't know her father," said Liza. "If he ever found out... Do go down and get her for me."

A DOOR CLOSED down the hall and a man came toward them pulling on a robe over his pyjamas.

"It's Gil!" Liza turned helplessly to Kelly. "Do something! Oh, don't tell him—"

"Pretend you're ill," Kelly said. He turned her around and started her for her room, greeting Gil with, "Take over, Gil, will you? I want to see if I can't help Diane."

"Help her with what?" Gil regarded Liza with puffy, bloodshot eyes. His voice intimated that anything she said would be used against her. "What are you doing out here this time of night?"

"Something she ate," said Kelly. "Diane's trying to scare up some bismuth or something. I'll go help her."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I tried. You were asleep. Snoring."

He was offended. "I never snored in my life," he said.

Liza shivered with cold and nervousness.

"You running a temperature?" he demanded.

"I don't think so."

"You look feverish."

Quick footsteps back of them and Diane hurried toward them followed by Kelly. She passed Gil without a glance and swept Liza with her into their own room.

"I told you to stay in bed;" she told Liza severely and she closed the door in Gil's face.

She stepped into the bath room and turned on the water in the basin letting it run full force for a moment.

Liza locked the door and took the key to bed with her.

"Don't say it," begged Diane in a whisper. She began to undress hurriedly. "The walls are like paper, just go to sleep and leave the lecture till tomorrow."

Liza buried her chin in the covers and tried to stop shaking. She couldn't believe she had been such a hypocrite. She, who prided herself on her integrity, her honesty... The light was out now. Honesty and integrity. Beautiful words.

She awakened early still dismayed by what had happened last night. She resented Kelly's siding with Diane. His easy acceptance of the situation had set the pattern of her own conduct. Deliberately he had led her to jeopardize her position with Gil, with the Osbornes. If she lost Gil's confi-

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dence, she lost her soft berth with the Osbornes. If she lost out with the Osbornes she would have to go back to Blassville and her old job at the store. Once she went back to work it would be doubly hard to get back to the university. Very depressing. No one but an idiot would....

Church bells rang out and set the Husky dogs howling.

"Good morning, my love," Diane sang out. For the first morning of the entire trip she sat up without urging and gaze Liza a dewy-eyed smile. "He's gone, Liza. They had to start back last night." She winked both eyes at Liza, a little-girl's trick. "Isn't he the handsomest thing you've ever seen? Oh, Liza, I do love him so! He has this wonderful lawyer who says we've shown our good intentions by waiting a year. What I mean, the judge will see we're sincere and earnest." She bounced over to Liza's bed and gave her a warm hug. "Oh, Liza, thank you for being such a lamb last night."

"I'm not proud of myself."

"I love Kelly Leighton, too," sighed Diane generously. "He was wonderful."

"Hm," said Liza bitterly.

Diane's eyes widened. "Surely you aren't sorry about last night?"

"CERTAINLY I'm sorry. What would your parents think? What would Gil think?"

"You actually don't believe me when I say Gil's a stinker?" Diane stood up and stretched on tiptoe in sudden decision. "Okay, Liza, you won't like it, but this is one thing we're going to do my way."

"What thing?"

"You'll see," said Diane. "It's a must." She padded to the bathroom and examined the thin partition that separated it from the bedroom. "The acoustics are perfect."

There was a light knock at the door. "You girls ready for breakfast?" came Gil's voice, low and pleasant.

"Give us ten minutes," Diane called out. She smiled at Liza and whispered, "We'll run through the rehearsal right after breakfast."

"Diane, I refuse—"

"You're not in the act, honey... Now look, you've made me put my slip on backwards."

After breakfast Liza was in the bathroom giving her teeth a good scrubbing when Diane poked her head in at the open doorway, looking grim and determined.

"Rinse your mouth out, lamb," she said. "You'll need to rinse it out again after this is over."

"Sorry, Diane, I've no time for monkey business, I have to get a letter off to your folks."

"Won't take a minute." Diane motioned her through the bathroom and into the shower. "Just make like a mouse."

There was a light knock at the outer door and Gil said, "Door's open. Anyone home?"

"Come in," said Diane.

Footsteps and then Gil saying: "Where's Liza?"

"She said something about getting a letter off to the family."

"You're looking mighty tempting this morning, Blue Eyes. What's that you're doing? Manicure?"

"It's a darned old hangnail."

"Here, let me help."

"No thank you."

"Why do you always shrug away

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from me, Diane? Here we've spent weeks together and still you act as though I were some bungling stranger."

"I don't happen to be the smoochy type. Fun is fun and all that but leave out the smooching."

"You're such a darling." His voice deepened. "I've never given up loving you, you know that."

"Sh, Gil, please."

HIS VOICE was barely audible: "How can I help it when I love you?"

There was the sound of a chair scraping the floor.

"Stop it, Gil. Liza may pop in any minute."

"Forget Liza. No one ever meant anything to me but you, Diane. You know that."

"I know I'm married," she said, in a tight voice.

He laughed. "Nothing permanent," he said.

A brief struggle, quick footsteps and Diane's voice from the hallway, "Wait a minute, Kelly, I'll go down with you."

Gil swore under his breath. He stood a moment at the door as though waiting for the other two to get out of sight and then he, too, left the room.

Liza moved stiffly from the shower to a chair in the bedroom. She burned with a confused mixture of shame and indignation. Diane had meant to expose Gil but in reality she had exposed Liza as a blind, trusting goof who felt that her life had suddenly gone smash.

She heard a step in the hallway and rose to her feet. If it was Diane returning, she was determined to pass her without a word. She could not face anyone. She did not want to see Diane, nor Gil, nor anyone at all. The footsteps faded out and presently she stepped outside.

The door at the end of the hall opened upon an old-fashioned fire escape with solid steps. She unlatched the door and went out that way, to avoid anyone who might be in the lobby. She crossed the weed-grown vacant lot to the back of the property and walked down the side street to the river.

There at the dock was an old river boat with its huge stern wheel painted a bright reddish orange. There were other people around, some of them acquaintances from the Prince Charles, and she moved off, walking rapidly along the board walk. She walked for an hour before she turned slowly back to the hotel. She detested the thought of the hotel, she detested Whitehorse. The train could not leave too soon to suit her.

And yet, now that she had walked herself into a healthy glow, she had an odd feeling of freedom. Deeper than the humiliation, deeper than the insult, was this feeling of freedom. She had been restricted by her devotion to Gil but now she was free.

After all, who was Gil to bully her? All that talk of his about how happy they could be if either of them had a little money. He was going to feel pretty silly if ever again he tried any of that secret love making. Really, had she ever taken him seriously? Wasn't it just that he had always bossed her around as a child and she had accepted it without protest?

Things would be different now. Oh, not on the surface. She owed it to Diane to make the return trip home as pleasant as possible. She had never given herself away to anyone except Diane... And Kelly? Hadn't he known from the first with all her vain boasting about her boy friend who was going to meet her at the Vancouver airport? Liza's cheeks burned when she thought of Kelly. He was not to be trusted, either, such low standards, lying to Gil last night without a moment's hesitation. Looking Gil right in the eye and lying to him. She would avoid Kelly.

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GIL SAID he had been looking everywhere for her when she returned to the hotel.

"You want to miss the train?" he demanded. "Sick last night and now wandering around in the rain. Does that make sense?"

"It's just a heavy mist," said Liza. "I like it."

She found Diane waiting upstairs for her. Liza was cool and independent.

"Liza, you're not angry with me?"

Liza shook her head and quickly rearranged her case so there would be room for her hair brush.

Diane hovered around her anxiously. "I think you're worth two dozen Gilbert Parkers," she said wistfully.

But there was nothing, simply nothing Liza wanted to say to her.

There was a long delay before the little train started back down the mountain. Diane, Gil and Kelly were aboard but Liza lingered under the shelter of the overhand of the station roof and listened to a local resident talk on the customs of the coast Indians.

Seated on the train, she began reading the little book which she had bought from the Indian authority.

Diane and Gil had gone back to their chess game. Kelly talked endlessly with the Texan from Huston who had made the trip up here by bus. At last Kelly went to stand on the back platform of the car.

Liza had avoided him all day, but now, chastened and wistful, she put her book aside and went out to the open platform of the car where Kelly stood to the right of the doorway moodily watching the misty meadows, the forest and the hazy mountains.

"I want to apologize," she said, moving discreetly to the left side of the doorway. "I wasn't very polite last night."

He stared at her suspiciously and still she smiled at him. He turned and glanced back over his shoulder through the window at the passengers inside. He seemed to be debating with himself.

"Polite?" he said. He moved over to her side of the doorway to make himself heard above the clatter and thumping of the little train. "Were you ever polite to me?"

Liza clutched the iron railing back of her, swayed with the motion of the train. She looked into his eyes and saw in them such earnest indignation that she had to laugh. That delicious new feeling of freedom was hard to manage. Still she couldn't bear to see him so unhappy. In a way, she owed her freedom to him. She shied away from the thought of owing anyone anything. It was the feeling she always associated with Gil.

"I think I'm confuse she said.

"You think!"

She nodded. "Even at first day on the plane I knew you were extra special but I was too fogged up with Gil to realize."

His hand rested on her own now. "Of course you know I gave up a perfectly good fishing trip to keep an eye on you," he said.

"I knew in a way," Liza admitted.

"What's happened?"

"I just saw I was wasting my life."

"High time you woke up," he said. "You'll never know how near I came to hopping a plane in Whitehorse and calling the whole thing off."

"Oh, no!" said Liza.

His hands tightened on hers. "What about Gil?" he asked.

"He's not for me," said Liza firmly.

Kelly's brows lifted in question. "I'm the one?" he asked.

Liza didn't deny it and his smile was warm and confident, reminding her of that first day on the plane when she felt instinctively that he was a man to watch.

She smiled at him, a little flushed. "You're wonderful."

"I've been thinking it over," said Kelly. "You're wonderful, too."

THE END

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"Could you take the kind of life we live here?" he asked.

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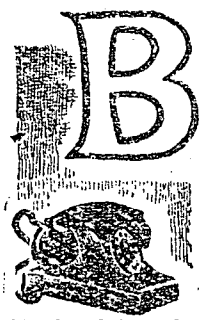
ONLY LOVE IS TRADITIONAL

By Jane Batton

Mother was right!



BARBARA LANE—who always wanted to be called Babs—stepped off the train at the New Orleans station and felt she was entering a new and happier life. Ahead of her was one spring as specified, leisurely, southern and, she hoped, romantic.

Barbara posed genteelly, holding her blonde head high and her blue eyes innocently wide. After all she was from New York which was the ultimate in everything, and she intended to impress these southerners before she permitted them to entertain her as royally as possible. She couldn't help wondering who would meet her among all the large family of second to tenth cousins she possessed down here. Again she hoped he would be distant, dark and dramatic.

"Hello. You the Lane girl?"

Barbara's eyebrows rose. That curt crisp manner, that clipped speech. Oh, no, she groaned, but pasted her prettiest smile on her rosy mouth. Then she saw him and the smile got slightly fixed. He looked so terribly, terribly northern, fair and clean cut and, hateful words, completely efficient.

"Miss Lane? My, are we glad to see you." There was no doubting his cordial manner. "Have we been having a time? Can we ever use another hand around the place! A northern girl, brisk, useful, eager to do things—"

Barbara broke in. "Mr. Whoever-

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You-Are, I hate to do this to you but I might as well disillusion you fast. I am not eager. Except for a long leisurely holiday. I am not eager and useful. Anything but."

"Modest too," he said admiringly. "I knew we'd get along. I knew you had the right attitude from the fine way the others have made a complete about face and cooperate with me now. You are one of them, after all. Oh, by the way, I'm Tom Dalancy. Your aunt hired me at the beginning of the season to manage the place. I couldn't run it into bankruptcy faster than she was, was her theory, but of course now we're going to pull it out. Without me, they were just too easy going."

"That makes my cousins sound like delightful people," Barbara said icily. "Congenial also. I just got fired for one of the most awful mistakes ever perpetrated in the advertising business. Among other things, it seemed worse to leave New York until it had been forgotten. If it can be forgotten."

Then Barbara winced slightly. She wished she could forget it, that casual little slipup in the copy, which had gone around the country, a small thing but unique in its way. A mere omission of a 'not', so that Linocork Linolium proclaimed itself through the country as the linolium most likely to crack.

He looked startled. "I trust that's not the *exact* truth."

"Exact?" Barbara laughed bitterly. "No. It's an understatement."

Because secretly she wondered if she ever could get an advertising job in New York again. Or if she even wanted one. She was convinced she was nursing psychological scars which nothing could erase. All of them against work. Because it had been sheer over-work which had let her to make the mistake, over-devotion to her job which had kicked back at her.

And in firing her, not a soul had taken into consideration that she had been slap-happy and groggy from practically three nights without sleep when she made that mistake. And the bitterest touch of all, the one she could not forgive herself, was that those nights had been spent working. If they had been spent in romancing at some divine spot, dancing to the highest cover charge in town, she wouldn't have minded.

As it was, she felt she had developed a permanent allergy to work. This long standing invitation to visit her southern cousins had seemed the perfect answer. To accept it, to find a wealthy and handsome husband, and to let him support her in the idlest luxury imaginable were her new aims in life. And she intended to attain them.

She could hardly wait to get to the plantation. The soft singing of the servants as they toiled around the place, breakfast in bed, a leisurely lunch, a choice of dates and the hardest work of the day, deciding what to wear in the evening.

"YOU KNOW we're busy at the plantation right now," Tom said slowly. "From can to can't."

"Let's just say I can't," Barbara said gaily.

"You know," he said slowly, "I think you may not know much about plantations. It isn't much like the movies."

"Then I'll see what I can do about reforming it," Barbara said heatedly. "I know just the kind of a holiday I want here and I intend to have it. In spite of anything or anybody."

"But a plantation is the last place on earth for a holiday. At least, not the Lane plantation as things are now."

"Perhaps things can be changed."

"That's just what I'm trying to do. But I suspect not in the direction you'd like. And something tells me if we tangle, I'm just a wee bit heavier weight in every way than you are. And weight usually wins the fight."

"Unless it's lead in the feet," Barbara said sweetly.

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"I'll be a gentleman, I won't mention lead in the head. Or my opinion of parasitic women."

"You're very sure your opinion matters, aren't you? Are you also stupid and conceited enough to think women fall for insults? The original cave man theory was all wrong. Or hasn't anyone told you?"

And she meant it. She did hate conceited men. And here was one if she ever saw one. In silence, she got in the car and in more silence, they rode through New Orleans, along a highway, then along a dirt red road and then the car turned in through a stately lane of trees.

Barbara gave an involuntary exclamation. This Delancy person must be the lowest form of human life, a practical joker, because there it was, the plantation life of her dreams, gleaming white, pillered two stories high, with a lush green lawn even at this season. Luxury, beauty, glamor, Barbara just sighed with ecstasy.

"And the neighbors are calling," Tom said in an odd dry tone.

Barbara followed his glance and there was more dream stuff, a high stepping bay, horse show material. And the man beside him! Barbara hoped nobody could read her mind. Gorgeous, simply gorgeous.

But he didn't stop to speak. He simply rode past them, lifted his hat, showing black black hair, bowed and was gone.

"And who was that?" Barbara demanded.

"The kind of southern gentleman you had in mind, I suspect. Owns the neighboring plantation. Famous all over Louisiana for his horses. Never has worked in his life. Name of Beauregard Wells, usually called Beau for obvious reasons."

But Tom didn't like Beau. Jealous of him, Barbara decided instantly, and thought it was only natural. Why couldn't Beau have met her instead of Tom? Well, you couldn't have everything and time should remedy that. Time or a certain Barbara Lane.

THE DOOR was opened by a heavy-set negro maid. She looked at Barbara curiously, almost hostily, although Barbara couldn't quite figure out how she got the impression of hostility. The girl took the two expensive, travel-ticketed pieces of luggage from Tom and led the way upstairs. Without speaking she opened the door to Barbara's room and started to unpack.

"My name's Sissy, ma'am," she said.

Barbara nodded. She was wondering uneasily why her aunt hadn't met her downstairs. Surely she'd known on what train Barbara was arriving. It seemed odd, to say the least. And after all those letters urging her niece to visit them!

Anyway, here she was. And during this winter's visit she intended to soak up all the rest and luxury and indulgent living she could get. Sort of store it up against the summer, when she would return to her beloved New York, refreshed and eager to work.

Lord knows she'd need that eagerness, after the mess she'd made of her job. Her mother had always told her that a woman was smarter not to work. This sort of life she was about to begin was the way a woman should live. But Barbara had always fought staunchly for her belief that a woman should work; that she should be busy and useful in order to be happy. Well, look what it had done to her. Mother had been right!

She could hear sounds of activity going on downstairs and realized suddenly that it must be nearly time for dinner. Too, the maid had drawn her bath before she left. Oh, this was the life!

She bathed quickly while she tried to decide which of her two evening dresses she would wear. The yellow one, that was it. It was strapless, wide-skirted and romantic looking.

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Just the feel and sound of it as it swished made her feel glamorous. She brushed back her short blonde hair in an effort to make it look sleek. She got out the jet jewelry that had always been a little too formal for her to wear. "Pretty as a model posing for a picture of glamor in the south," she told herself complacently as she went downstairs.

TOM WAS waiting in the small informal drawing room. He took one look at her.

With what seemed like genuine horror he cried, "You're not wearing *that* for dinner!"

Barbara's chin went up defiantly and somewhat in surprise. "Certainly, I'm wearing this. I'm wearing this to dinner, and I'll always wear anything I think proper, as long as I'm here!" Just as she had suspected, what a boor the man was turning out to be!

"If you're a smart girl," Tom said seriously, "you'll not only take off all that jewelry, but you'll change your dress. Don't you own a simple, appropriate silk print?"

"Are you implying that I'm vulgarly over-dressed?"

"You said it. Not I," he answered in anything but pleasant tones.

With that he seemed to lose every vestige of self-control. He stepped forward. He reached out while Barbara stood there too shocked to move or speak and removed every one, piece by piece of her beautiful jet jewelry.

Barbara hated herself for it, but she was very conscious of his touch.

"That helps a little," he decided, stepping back for a better, if no less disapproving look.

His hand reached up and actually touched her dress, as if he were fighting the temptation to take that off too. Barbara stood frozen with incredulity.

Evidently, he too was shocked. He drew his hand back quickly, as if the brief contact had burned it. Then he said, almost pleadingly:

"Really you'd be happier if you changed."

He did sound sincere. She hated to admit it, but he did. He actually sounded like the nice kind of man who worried whether a girl would be happy. But she wasn't going to be fooled by that change of approach.

Instead, she drawled with deliberate indolence. "Look, Bossy, how long have you lived down south? After all, my family have lived here for five generations, until mother married and went north. What makes you think you know the answers?"

He actually grinned. "I know some of the answers. Besides, there is such a thing as having the proper instinct." His eyes glinted. He murmured, "Speaking of instincts, I have more than one kind, and I'm afraid you inspire some of the worst of them."

He was building up an excuse in advance, Barbara had sense enough to know that. But she didn't duck back when he took her in his arms. Instead she relaxed and enjoyed the thorough kiss he pressed on her lips. She admitted to herself that it was one thing he did well. It was the nicest kiss she'd ever had.

He stepped back. "Now you look better," he decided. "At least you've lost that dead pan model look."

"You might look at yourself," she suggested practically. "You've lost that clean-cut, clean-living, outdoor type of American manhood look. Wipe off the lipstick, Bub."

She heard brisk footsteps on the stairs and then her aunt Rose walked into the room. She wore a simple print, such as Tom had recommended, and her face had the tanned look of one who was much in the sun, but of one who worked there instead of idling around for the purpose of a suntan.

She held out shapely, but work-hardened hands in welcome. "Barbara, my dear, I'm so sorry I couldn't get off to meet you. But we're trying to beat the weather with the crops.

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Tom managed to finish his work early so he could get down to meet your train. I hope you'll be happy here, and Lord knows we can use an extra hand."

Barbara was so surprised that she gasped out without thinking, "You mean, everybody works here?" Involuntarily she looked around the luxuriously appointed house.

Her aunt smiled charmingly but a bit sheepishly. "My dear, I suppose I'll have to tell you the truth. We've always spent so much money keeping up the house that at last the money simply ran out. Now we've hired Tom to show us how to make the plantation a better paying proposition again. He's a human work machine and the first thing he did was to put us all to work. Let me warn you, he'll do the same to you. I hope you'll like it here, even though it may not be what you expected. What we have, we offer with all our hearts."

Barbara couldn't remember meeting anyone she'd liked as well as her aunt Rose. Yet a lifetime of dreams died hard. She was confused. She wanted to please her aunt but hated the idea of doing anything Tom wanted. And suddenly she remembered 'Beau'. She knew instinctively he wasn't the type who liked a girl who worked. He'd appreciate a fluffy yellow dress. And she would appreciate Beau.

Evidently her aunt sensed her dismay, even though she attempted to conceal it. "I know you're not used to working outdoors," she said gently, "especially under our southern sun. But I have a feeling that you'll learn something—and gain something too. The south has learned some things and what we have we're eager to share with others."

Without thinking, Barbara wailed, "But it was the old leisurely south I've always dreamed about visiting—I want that!"

"Try it our way, dear," her aunt Rose said sweetly but firmly.

Tom spoke up then. "I have something in mind for you that I think you'll enjoy. You have to know cotton to see any romance in the fields. But I think anyone enjoys a vegetable garden. You should."

Barbara shuddered but at the same time, a thought passed through her mind. "This man should be a diplomat. He's wasting his talents as a slave driver."

Aunt Rose said enthusiastically, "Tom, as usual you've found the perfect solution."

Barbara wondered.

Chapter Two

AFTER DINNER, Tom took Barbara out to show her the plantation's famous rose garden. The bushes were just coming into their full spring bloom and the air was drenched with sweet scent, almost seeming to drift on the moonbeams. In the arbor, a glass windchime tinkled above the soft hum of night insects.

"You know," Tom said softly, "you're a lucky girl. You have a wonderful aunt. The only trouble with her is that, like you, she didn't realize that you can't preserve all this beauty without working for it. Someday you too will learn that."

Barbara felt like two cents even as she said it. "Maybe I don't want to learn," she muttered shortly.

"I thought there might be something to you," Tom said and his voice was expressionless. "But you're just the way you look. Beautiful, expensive—and not worth it! I hope you understand that you're everything that I don't admire."

Barbara's laugh taunted him. "I understand. I only hope you understand that I don't give a damn for your opinion. I've worked all my life

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and now I know there are other ways to get what you want."

"You'll work now all right. You'll work as long as you're here," Tom's voice was grim.

"Of course, I'll work," she answered scornfully. "But do you mind my saying that it's all going to be terribly dull, including you!" And, she thought furiously, Mr. high and mighty Tom was going to learn a few things himself while these lessons were being taught.

To her intense irritation, Barbara found herself spending most of her spare time planning ways and means of making Tom regret he had ever suggested her doing anything more strenuous than sitting on the veranda looking beautiful. She spent more than her spare time. She stayed awake that night to give it more thought.

WHEN SHE awoke in the morning, a new problem presented itself. Standing in a frilly blue robe, she looked into the closet and couldn't find a single thing that looked—horrible word, she thought, her nose wrinkling distastefully—functional. She reached out a tentative hand for the plain white linen just as someone knocked on the door.

Tying the belt around her middle firmly, Barbara brightened. Perhaps this place was civilized after all. That must be a maid with breakfast.

"Come in," she called cordially.

Then as the door swung open, the smile froze on her fast. It wasn't breakfast. It wasn't even anyone she wanted to see. It was Tom. Over one arm, he carried a pair of shabby washed-out blue jeans and from the other hand dangled a limp jersey tee-shirt.

"For you," he said briefly. "You probably didn't bring any."

"You're so thoughtful," Barbara said, hating herself for being reduced to heavy sarcasm.

But he probably didn't hear her. The door had already slammed behind him. Barbara glared at the clothes for a minute and then put them on. That seemed the safest course. Naturally, they did nothing for her.

Breakfast, though substantial was a hurried affair. Barbara sipped orange juice and choked through a cup of incredibly strong coffee.

Her aunt murmured, "You'd better have a couple of eggs. Or some bacon at least."

"No, thank you, Aunt Rose. I'm never hungry this early in the morning."

Even the way Tom lifted an eyebrow at that remark was obnoxious. Together, they all rode out to the north field. Aunt Rose left them at this point.

Barbara looked at Tom. Something disagreeable must be in the offing. Tom looked entirely too happy for it to be anything pleasant.

"You start over here," he showed her. He got down on one knee. "See, you crumple the earth like this between your fingers. When you have it fine, you make a straight row. Then you plant these seeds. All this is the vegetable garden. We try to be as self-sufficient as possible. The seeds are all marked. Even you can't make a mistake."

"Oh, can't I?" Barbara muttered rebelliously.

AFTER ONE hour of steady planting, she was not only sore but bored. Would she never get finished with the green peppers? She looked longingly at the radishes. Surely there could be no real harm in putting some pretty red radishes among the glossy green peppers. Besides, the seeds would be finished twice as fast.

After that, her creative instinct took over, spiced by the knowledge she was putting something over on Tom, though she was doing no real harm. A few weeks from now, Tom was going to have a little surprise. Beets and carrots were neatly alternated in one row and in another, she defied anyone

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to tell where the lima beans started and the peas ended. If she had to ache all over, with the largest ache an empty stomach, at least she had had a little fun.

Somehow the day finally ended, punctuated only by the largest lunch she had ever eaten in her life. By late afternoon, Barbara only wanted to go to bed and die. She dragged back to the house with Aunt Rose and Tom. He looked so vital and alive that she hated him. The man was nothing better than an animal.

"By the way," Tom said casually as Barbara stood looking at the stairs, wondering how she would ever get up them, "Beau is coming over for dinner."

Barbara groaned.

"I thought you'd be pleased," Tom said.

"I might be pleased," Barbara said bitterly, "if I could put one foot in front of the other, let alone bat my eyebrows at a fascinating male, the only fascinating male I've seen in these parts. Couldn't you have waited until I got used to all this?"

"But I saw your face when you saw him so I told your aunt you'd like to meet him."

"If there's a wrong thing to be done, trust you to do it," Barbara said.

In her room, she looked in the mirror and knew how all southerners felt about Vicksburg. If the old plantation had been burned to the ground she couldn't have looked worse. She doubted if all her beauty aids would ever repair the devastation of the War of the Vegetable Garden.

Her Aunt Rose called through the door that Beau was expected in half an hour. After that, it wasn't a question of how well she could put on a face but how fast.

Barbara felt as if she were staggering bow-legged down the stairs. She remembered blackly the sweeping descent she had planned.

Beau was more attractive than she had realized. He even managed to make her feel attractive.

Because he said, "Believe it or not, I have been counting the hours and you're more beautiful than I remembered."

Barbara found she had a flutter left in her eyebrows after all. Why had she ever thought she didn't like blond men? Why, they were wonderful. But of course, she had never met a blond like Beau. He'd be special, blond, brunette or redhead.

After dinner, Aunt Rose and Tom said they had to go over the books. Without a word, Beau smiled down at Barbara, took her arm and led her out on the gallery.

He murmured, "Do you know it's an old tradition that each generation a Lane and a Wells fall in love but never marry. That's one tradition I'd like to see broken."

His voice stopped but his words still tingled pleasantly against her ears. Her intelligence told Barbara that this was too sudden to be real but her daydreamy emotions reassured her. Wasn't this what she had expected? So why was she so surprised?

"But you impressed me as the type who believed in tradition," Barbara smiled.

He said, "I do. I even try to live up to it. Tomorrow night I'd like to show you the place which is the traditional Wells-Lane rendezvous. But this will have to do for tonight."

Barbara saw then that he was going to draw her into his arms. It was her moment of glamour. This was southern moonlight and a soft spring breeze and a handsome man kissing a pretty girl on a beautiful gallery. But her pulse didn't quicken. Somehow it was like something she was seeing, not living.

BEAU'S ARMS dropped and he looked at her strangely as if he too felt an odd chill. He didn't try to kiss her again. But they stood close together, held in a stange bewilderment, two people who had obviously just been kissing.

Tom's voice broke crudely across

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the moment. "We just realized we'd been rude enough to leave without offering you a drink but you've obviously found something just as stimulating."

Barbara heard Beau catch his breath. She was startled to sense for the first time a more than deep dislike between the two men.

"Could it be we have the same tastes?" Beau asked, cold and courteous but cutting.

He said goodnight briefly, his eyes lingering on Barbara before he turned away.

She was furious with Tom. "That was a childish thing to do," Barbara said.

"Was he telling you about the Wells-Lane tradition?" Tom asked. "It's true as far as it goes. The Wells have always been handsome and charming. But the people who have lived around here with them for generations know what's under that charm so it's no wonder no Lane girl ever married one. But you're not from around here and don't know and you're just unrealistic enough about all this southern stuff you might break the tradition. Heaven pity you if you do."

"As long as you don't offer your own peculiar forms of help," Barbara said, remembering the vegetable garden, "I imagine I'll get by."

But just the same, Barbara's face shadowed. What did he mean 'unrealistic'. But she mustn't imagine things. Tom couldn't know what a strange unreal feeling Beau's kiss had given her.

Still puzzling, speaking half to herself, Barbara said, "But everything has seemed unreal and mixed up ever since I got off the train. Maybe I wouldn't know reality if it hit me in the face."

Unexpectedly, Tom chuckled. "Oh, Lord," he said wryly, "It's up to me to set you straight again. Now tell me if this seems unreal."

He put his arms around her with no enthusiasm. Barbara didn't even bother to move away. She even cooperated a little, without intending to because she lifted her chin to glare up at him haughtily.

Tom deliberately pressed his lips down on hers. Then Barbara lost the thread of her thoughts and responded through sheer emotions, her own lips clinging to his in the realest kiss she'd ever had.

She was the one to break away. Tom's arms lingered around her and then fell away. Instinctively, Barbara knew that Tom was as aware as she that they had shared a tremendous emotional experience.

Barbara fought to recover her self-possession. "There was a difference," she commented in the biggest understatement of her life.

"I thought you'd notice that," Tom said blandly and turned and walked through the door.

Alone in the glamorous moonlight, with no man at all, Barbara discovered with surprise she had only one wish—to lash out at Tom's conceit. Oh, what conceit. Her fists clenched and she looked at them wistfully. Just once, she thought, just once, let me hit that man.

Chapter Three

ALL THE next day, the harder she worked, the deeper and more sincere that wish grew. Even the thought of her date with Beau was not as vivid in her mind.

But after dinner, while she dressed, Barbara's eyes grew dreamy. This would be more like her idea of life in the south. She gave herself the works, brushed her hair until it shown, put on her short yellow strapless gown with the rustling skirt.

She had soaked in a hot tub long enough that when she heard Beau's voice downstairs, she was really able to make a sweeping entrance.

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Then from the living room, she heard two words in Tom's voice. "Oh, brother!"

Barbara felt the color rise in her face. But Beau, elegant in a dinner jacket, ignored the words. However, their exit from the house had an unfortunate suggestion of haste about it.

Beau's car was surprisingly shabby. But perhaps a man who loved beautiful horses cared nothing for cars, Barbara decided.

The grove was only a short distance away. The trees stood in stately rows and, hand in hand, Barbara walked with Beau. Barbara frowned slightly. This should have been like walking down a beautiful aisle but the trees formed a heavy oppressive ceiling above them and somehow it was cold and damp here, so she felt chilled in her strapless dress.

"So this is the traditional meeting place?" Barbara said, shivering a little.

He put his hand on her bare shoulder. "Are you cold?" he asked as if he found it surprising, almost impolite.

"No," Barbara lied gallantly. "I was just thinking how romantic this was."

"I'm glad you get the atmosphere," Beau said seriously. "Some people don't feel it at all."

Barbara looked at him with surprise. Beau sounded ever so slightly theatrical. It was just a little too sticky and pretty. And, incredibly enough, she wasn't having fun. She wanted out.

But Beau went on, "Have you thought any more about what I said? About breaking the tradition?"

"I've been so busy—" Barbara blurted out and then broke off. Idiot, she swore, stupid idiot. She muttered miserably, "I'm sorry."

"But I know you've been busy," Beau said admiringly. "Have you been working too hard? Are you tired?"

Barbara grasped at a straw. Anything to get out of this place. "Dead on my feet."

At his look of concern, she explained, "It's just the first few days."

"Then I guess you wouldn't want to go dancing?" he said doubtfully.

"Let's go back to the house," Barbara said, not quite knowing why she suggested that but knowing it was what she wanted.

Beau looked doubtful for a minute. Then he laughed, "For a beautiful lady, always, anything she wishes."

BARBARA had hoped the house would be quiet and dark with no one around. But Tom was sitting on the gallery, smoking his pipe. He stood up, knocking its bowl against the rail.

"Back early," he murmured.

She might have known he'd say that. "Mosquitoes," she said briefly.

"In April?"

"First crop mosquitoes," Barbara said firmly.

"If Barbara says there were mosquitoes, there were mosquitoes," Beau said aggressively.

"And if she says you're fascinating does that mean I'm supposed to be dope enough to believe you are?"

"Are you trying to push me into something?" Beau asked. "I've taken a lot from you."

"You Wells will take anything that's for free," Tom said indolently.

"At least we don't fight with upstarts like you."

"And I," Tom said coldly, "don't spend my time looking around for a woman to marry me to take over the work on the plantation."

"Tom, stop this," Barbara cried.

"Why stop? When it's true. The Wells always have been a worthless lazy lot, wasting their time with horses, while the women stick around to keep the place together. You're a northern girl, efficient, he thinks. That what interests him in you."

"That I must resent," Beau said, stepping forward, fists clenched.

Those fists never got up. Tom's right had Beau on the floor before he really started moving.

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Barbara turned away. Somehow she couldn't doubt that every word Tom had said was true. No wonder Beau had rung a little phony without her knowing why at the time. Recognizing him for what he was, she couldn't like him, never wanted to see him again, but she didn't want to witness his humiliation.

He must have sensed what she felt from the very stiffness of her back. She heard Beau get up and then the sounds of his feet on the gallery stairs and the sound of his car starting. He was gone.

But she knew too that she didn't want to turn and face Tom either. She didn't want to face herself yet. Because, in that moment of physical clash between two males fighting over a woman, her own primitive instinct had asserted itself. She had known in a flash which one was her man.

Perhaps, without admitting it consciously, she had known it when he kissed her last night. No wonder Beau had had no appeal for her tonight.

"As you said, I'm always doing the wrong thing," Tom's voice said ruefully.

"Not always," Barbara said.

Without conscious volition she turned and Tom must have seen the love in her eyes. Both moved and then they were together.

But almost as if he did not dare kiss her until he had asked, Tom said, "But could you ever take the life we live here?"

Barbara giggled suddenly. "Do you think I'm going to leave without eating those vegetables after the way I worked getting them in?" Then she gulped contritely, "Oh, dear. Oh, why did I do it? Oh, Tom. I mixed them all up. Because I was mad at you."

"Did you, dear?" Tom asked gently and then his lips twitched. "Don't let it worry you. You're the one who will have to unmix them when you pick them."

Then he did kiss her. And suddenly, Barbara knew that all the romance, all the glamour she had dreamed were here in Tom's arms, only more beautiful, lovelier than her dreams.

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PRETTY POLLY

By Phyllis Speshock

POLLY TYLER rechecked the little wire doors on all of the cages to make certain that none of her precious budgies could escape into the mayhem of the Combined Bird Show and sensed a loss of some sort.

"Bobbie?" she called softly. "Bobbie?" She puckered her small mouth and made clucking sounds. "Bobbie?"

At once Bobbie appeared on her horizon, but not at all in the manner in which she had assumed he would appear. He was jogging along, instead, on the forefinger of a tall, disgusted looking young man with very dark eyes and hair to match.

"Here!" He held the forefinger out to her, but Bobbie sat there contentedly and went about cleaning his beak, inside out.

She was just simple, pretty Polly Tyler, who raised birds.

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Polly felt a warm sweep of maternal emotion. "He likes you!" she whispered.

"I don't like him!" He gave his forefinger a little jerk and the cobalt blue parakeet flitted into the air and came to rest on Polly's shoulder.

"How dare you!" Polly choked angrily at him. "You and that—that *crow* of yours! Why don't you go home and leave the show to bird lovers?" Her blue eyes came alive with ire, and she felt her face flush under his scrutiny.

"I might as well!" he retorted. "With all the firsts you've walked off with, no one else has a chance! You've stashed enough blue ribbons in three days to run up a throw rug! And Blackie *isn't* a crow! He's an India hill mynah, and he set me back two hundred bucks."

Polly cuddled the little wandering Bobbie close to her cheek and wrinkled her short pert nose at the tall rescue squad. "He still looks like a crow to me!"

"And this show looks like the basketball fixers had invaded the aviary with all the prizes you're taking! Whose relative are you?" He stood there feet planted firmly and arms akimbo, and Polly did not like the handsome picture he made. It ruffled her feathers.

"That's not true and you know it! I've never been to a bird show before! I raise budgerigars for a hobby and I sell some of them occasionally. I just thought it was high time I found out how good my birds are. And they don't have to be too hot to win over a crow!"

"An India hill mynah!" he corrected. "And we'll just see about that. There are still the gold cups and rosettes for the best in the show. Let's see you win those away from Blackie!"

He started away, but Bobbie would have none of it. He let out a quick, "Hey!" and went flying after the tall shoulder, in spite of the shrugging efforts made to unseat him.

The young man turned around again and stared at her. "You know what the attraction is, don't you?"

She eyed his tall form from head to toe. "No," she told him coldly. "I can't imagine *what* the attraction is!"

There was some satisfaction in watching the deep flush creep up beneath his dark skin. He walked close to her and looked down. It was her turn to flush. "You die your hair?"

"I do not! It's just naturally that color!" she spat back. While Bobbie sat happily on his shoulder and watched the entire procedure.

"Which is it—red or brown?"

"Brown!"

"I'll tell you what Bobbie's attraction for me is—a female albino!"

Polly's eyes widened and she forgot all about being angry. "You've got an albino? A pure white parakeet? But how? I mean what did you cross?"

"Trade secret!" he told her diabolically. "And see if one of your pure yellows can win over her!"

"Oh," it was just a dreamy sigh. "May I see her?"

HE SHRUGGED with superiority, and when he started away, Polly was hot on his trail. Bobbie left his shoulder when they came close to the albino's birth and flitted quickly to her cage and sat on top of it, making incoherent, cooing sounds.

The little albino climbed up to the top of the cage and hung there upside down watching her loved one performing all kinds of male feats to win her over.

"See?" the young man said, trying not to grin.

Polly was awed. "She's lovely! What do you call her?"

"Venus. I've got some cobalts at home. And a blue with a white face and a couple of blues with yellow

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faces. So, you see, I *do* have something to enter besides Blackie."

Polly felt her face go warm. Partly for her own rudeness and partly for the silly necking Bobbie was performing with Venus.

"Does she talk?"

He shrugged. "A little. Not so much as some of the others. My top is a vocabulary of about four hundred words."

Polly looked even more surprised. "That's wonderful. My top is three hundred words. Not Bobbie. He's mostly just a pet, but I have an Austrailian gray— Sa-ay!" She stopped and looked the albino over more closely. "If you're going to mate her, you ought to pick an Austrailian gray! They're all the fad this season and Bobbie is a cobalt blue. That would never—" She stopped when she saw his surprised expression. "You mean," she asked softly. "That you don't believe in mating budgies?"

"Of course I believe in it! But I also believe in letting her make her own decision! I'm not God!" His face darkened angrily.

"Well, don't be a goof! The idea of parakeets being just love birds is silly! It's a proven fact—the budgie by himself is quite a little guy. Mates usually just clutter up the cage! All I meant was that—"

"You really believe that?" he asked.

"Of course I believe it! Bobbie's never had a mate and he's perfectly happy!"

"Yeah! Look at him!"

Polly looked. Bobbie was in love, all right! He was rubbing bills like a draftee on his last night home, regardless of the public eye. Polly felt embarrassed and just a little irritated with him.

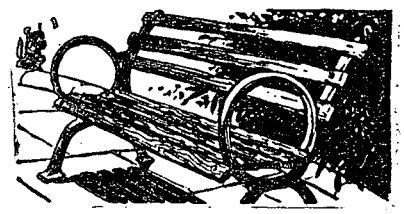
"That's silly!" she told the young man. "An Austrailian gray would be a perfect match for her! Bobbie is behaving like an idiot. I'll take him back. I'm sorry we bothered you, Mr.—"

"Rollins. Dan Rollins. Dan'll do. And Bobbie isn't silly. He's in love. And so is Venus from the looks she's giving him, and the sweet nothings they're whispering. You mean you don't believe in love?" he asked.

"Of course!" She did not like the personal switch this topic was taking. "It's just that birds, after all—"

"Birds, after all, what? Aren't they entitled to an opinion of their own? You want to pick their mates even if they love another little budgie? You belong in ancient China, don't you? Where brides were bartered off by their parents in infancy and had to take what they got stuck with! How'd you like to have *your* husband picked for you?"

Polly opened her mouth and then closed it suddenly. Have her husband picked for her? And what was all this hubbub around home with Arnold Olson? Wasn't he more or less the family choice? Mom and Pop and her sister, Kay, seemed to like having him around. Polly had known him practically all of her life. She would eventually drift into marriage with him. It was just one of those things. Storybook romances that swept a girl off her feet were just something to read about. They didn't really happen. Not to a girl like Polly, anyway. She was just simple, pretty Polly Tyler, who raised birds. A sweet girl, but not very exciting.



"YOU DON'T have to answer that," he said softly. "Your expression is enough! Are you engaged to him?"

Polly swallowed. "No. Not really. At least, I don't think I am—not formally—"

"Okay! That's enough! Look, I know your name. It's Polly Tyler. I

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couldn't help knowing it with all the prizes you've taken away from me! And you a novice, at that! Your first bird show! I shudder to think of next year's competition! Look, we might as well be friendly enemies. How about going over for a sandwich before the afternoon judging?"

"Well— I'll have to take Bobbie back first—"

"Baloney!" said Dan Rollins disrespectfully. He reached out and gently picked up little cobalt blue Bobbie, opened the door to Venus' cage and let him go. The result was breathtaking.

"But that's wrong!" Polly cried. "Bobbie shouldn't— I've got an Australian gray valued at eighty-five dollars and—"

He took her arm and led her away from the lovers. "And Venus loves *Bobbie!* In my book, love counts for something!"

It pained her to think of the outcome, but she left them alone and went obediently with Dan Rollins.

After they were seated and served and his stare was beginning to make her blush, she tried getting on a safer subject. "What kind of a place do you have to keep your birds in? I use the back of my folks house—an old sun porch turned aviary!"

He laid down the sandwich and became enthusiastic. "I've got a honey of a place! I raised the roof!"

Polly felt her brows go up into questioning little peaks. "You what?"

He laughed. "I raised the roof. You see, I lived at home too, but my folks aren't budgie enthusiasts. Either the birds had to go, or I had to. They gave me the bird!" he grinned energetically. "So I built a little home of my own, but it wasn't big enough, really. So I raised the roof. You see, where the attic was, I cut through the roof, raised it and built beneath it— a dormer, sort of. The original on the main roof was still all right. All I had to do was set in plenty of windows, and I had all the extra space I needed. The pitch is about one inch to the foot and a selvage edge asphalt roll roofing was just the thing—" His hands were going through all kinds of building processes with napkins and knives being propped up, and Polly didn't understand a word of what he was saying, but suddenly she liked him.

She liked him a lot. It made her feel sort of warm and happy, and she didn't seem to be able to stop smiling suddenly.

But he did stop talking, when he saw her expression. In fact he reached out and placed his hand over hers on top of the white table cloth. "I brought my birds down in a station wagon. Would you like the go for a ride?"

Polly nodded. She was going crazy she knew, but she wanted to go, just the same!

For a small town girl, the sights in the big city, even at high noon, were thrilling to be sure. Polly watched the busy bustle of people and sighed happily. She did not even object when he stopped along the bank of the river and looked at her silently. Why should she? It was broad daylight and she was twenty years old!

"You still disagree with me about Venus?" he asked softly.

Polly thought about the Australian gray. He was such a perfect match

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for her! She nodded affirmatively. "I do."

HE SLID close to her on the leather seat and drew her head down against his shoulder. Very deliberately he leaned down and placed his mouth firmly over hers.

It was a kiss that Polly Tyler was not likely to forget! It was long and tender and just a little questioning—and she liked it—too much!

"You still disagree with me?" he asked then.

"But the birds are—"

"Birds are entitled to lives of their own!" he finished nicely. "They were made free and given power to fly. We weren't—until we set up our own means! We keep them. We enjoy them. But we don't *own* them—not emotionally at least! You still disagree? If you were Venus, would *you* still marry somebody you didn't love? Because it was better for you?"

Polly thought about Arnold. He was on the short side and a little stocky, but very, very well-read and up on politics. A good provider, gentle, considerate. She wondered a little sadly just how he would like taking the part of the Australian gray!

"I see!" Dan Rollins said. "You still think you're right! You think this can't be happening. You think—"

"Stop trying to read my mind!" she told him a little angrily. "I didn't say any of that!"

"Your eyes did!" he reminded curtly. And he started the car for their return trip.

By the time they reached Bobbie and Venus, he seemed very aloof indeed. Well, Polly could take a hint! She snatched Bobbie away from Venus, in spite of his squawks and got him back in his own cage on the double!

For the remainder of the week, Polly stayed as stand-offish as Dan did. She did not sympathize with Bobbie, either.

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"It's your own fault," she whispered to him, "falling for a female named Venus! You can only get hurt when you put love first—" And Polly knew what she was talking about, too.

She did not admit to herself even that Venus *did* look a little dumpy these past few days. She chalked up two gold cups and a few rosettes for the best birds in the show. Blackie got a gold cup, too. That made her feel a little happier when Venus, the lovely albino, lost out to one of her pure yellows. At least it took the edge of her victory. Between the two of them, Polly and Dan Rollins, there were not so many prizes left for the owners of the remaining three hundred birds in competition. The rest of the faithful had pretty slim takings.

Polly had entered fifteen budgies and she came out with fifteen prizes in all, which wasn't a bad average. In fact, it was above par even in budgerigar circles!

On the last day at the show, Dan Rollins showed up with Venus. Bobbie all but tore his cage down.

"You're a female heel," Dan told Polly quietly. "Can't you see they're in love? Are you going to let common sense interfere with love?"

Polly tilted her chin. "Shut up!" she told Bobbie with soft anger. "And you," turning to Dan, "can take your old Venus away! It's her own fault if she lost to a pure yellow!"

"Guilty conscience, huh?" he asked with a maddening quiet.

"No!" She turned away, but he pulled her back with one angry movement. With one hand he set Venus down on top of Bobbie's birth and with the other he encircled her waist. "This is all silliness," he told her.

"It's common sense!"

"IT'S CRAZY," he corrected, "but it's wonderful. Or it could be if you'd stop acting like a nice hometown girl and get down to the business at hand! You know very well I love you. And I know what you think. You think it's crazy and you can't marry a man unless you've known him all

[*Turn To Page* 122]

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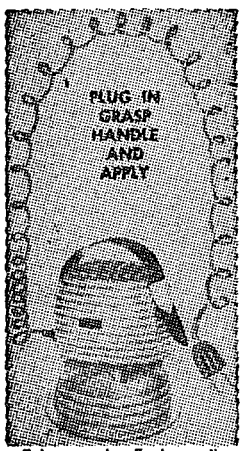

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of your life and you need a guy with a time clock regularity and not a goof who raises birds for a meagre living. But with the stock you've got and the stock I've got, we could make some real money. Not that I care if we starve—as long as it would be together—"

For some crazy reason Polly wanted to cry. For still a crazier reason, she wanted to take him up on his offer, but of course she couldn't. She was just feeling the same giddiness that swept Bobbie.

She glanced at Bobbie craning his neck out of his cage to pitch woo with Venus. It made her disgusted.

"The little house I built. It's big enough for two—or even three—"

Polly jerked away. She was losing her mind. That was it. When she got back home everything would be normal again. When Arnold kissed her....

She thought about that. And she remembered Dan's kiss. She looked up at him and he obliged with a refresher course. She heard the titter of the people milling around. She heard Bobbie twitter in his cage and that was enough to pull her loose.

"No!" she choked, his kiss still warm on her lips. "No!"

"You're going to stick to the Australian gray, huh?" He took out a pad and pencil and scribbled down an address. "If you change your mind, I live about a hundred miles south of here. If you're human enough to change your mind! Come on, Venus baby. We're the lost souls in a rat race! The left-overs of a marriage arrangement society!" He stalked off and Polly let the tears slide down her face.

Was he right? Could it be possible that everything she had taken for granted all of her life could be wrong? Should love come before knowledge of each other, before her family's wishes, before a tradition she had grown to?

Of course he was wrong! And time would prove it!

[*Turn To Page* 124]

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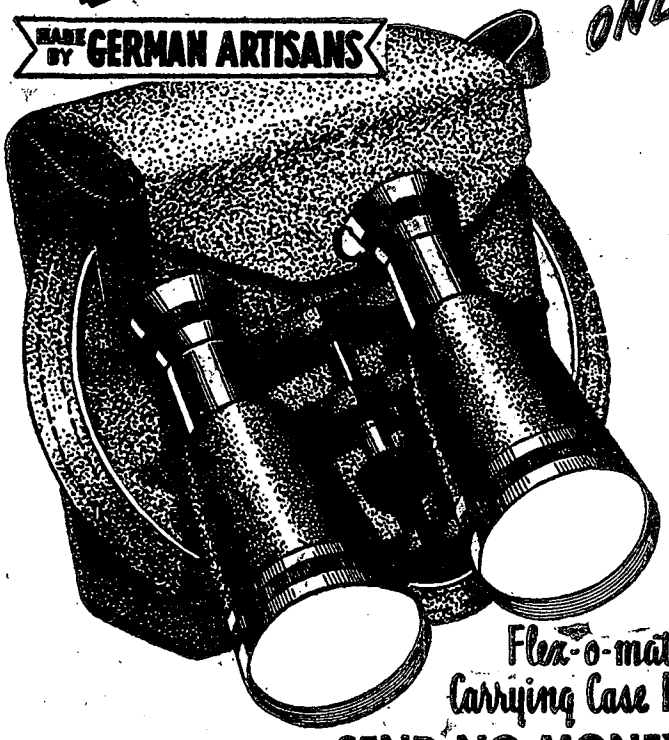

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"You just wait until you get home," she whispered to Bobbie. "Everything will be all right."

But everything was not all right. Arnold kissed her, and she felt revulsed! Her family fussed over him, and she felt it a nuisance. She watched her sister, Kay, who was the real red-head of the family, all but swoon at the sight of his stocky figure and she wondered what on earth the attraction could be.

She decided to become an old maid. Bobbie would have to remain a bachelor.

"Kay," she told her pajama-clad sister one night a week later, "I don't love Arnold. I never have. I won't marry him."

Kay opened her mouth. "But all your life—"

"I'm nuts, but I don't love him. I don't want him. Arnold doesn't know the meaning of real love!"

"Oh, but you're wrong! Arnold does know the meaning—" Suddenly Kay stopped dead and put the back of her hand to her young mouth. "I'm so sorry—" she murmured. "But the week you were gone, Arnold and I were sort of thrown together and—"

"You mean *you* love him?" Before Kay's affirmative nod even came, Polly felt a sort of happy relief. That took care of that. But what about Bobbie?

SHE WENT down and looked at him before she put the cover over his cage for night. He looked awful. He had suddenly, for no good reason in the bird world, begun to moult.

"Maybe you need more iron tonic in your water—" she suggeted. But that didn't help.

She tried a different brand of seeds and cuddle bone. He would have none of it. He didn't bother to recite poetry

[*Turn To Page* 126]

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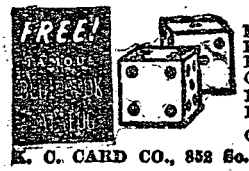

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or his name and address or even to cuss her out. He was really sick.

She looked through every bird catalogue she could find, but there were no female albinoes listed. It was crazy. Love birds did not necessarily have to be love birds—at least not budgies. They were too versatile, too intelligent to be cluttered up by mates! It just wasn't practical to ruin the breeding life of an albino and a cobalt blue because of some silly nonsense!

But Bobbie would look at none other. His heart was set on Venus. And Polly loved him dearly—even if he were a fool!

The following Monday, she boarded a plane for the scribbled address in her pocket. She tucked Bobbie into her suit coat pocket and lectured him about being quiet. He could show his elation later!

When the door opened, Polly was not at all surprised to find Venus humped up on Dan Rollin's shoulder. *She* was moulting, too! Bobbie let out one squawk and joined her in a tryst. Almost immediately they both looked better! Venus flew to a little cage in the corner of the room and Bobbie followed without further invitation. Polly felt like the Good Samaritan.

She swallowed. "Well, I guess that takes care of Bobbie."

"Is that all you came for?" he asked softly. His hair was mussed and his shirt sleeves were rolled and he looked a little seedy himself. But still handsome enough to make her heart flip and twitter like a cage full of her feathered friends.

"Yes. I thought he might die—"

"It would be an easy matter to drive back and pick up the rest of them."

"You want to buy me out?" she asked, feeling pretty clumsy and self-conscious.

"No. I want to marry you. You're a fool, but I still love you. What's with the long-standing boyfriend?" His voice held no humor whatsoever and

[*Turn To Page* 128]

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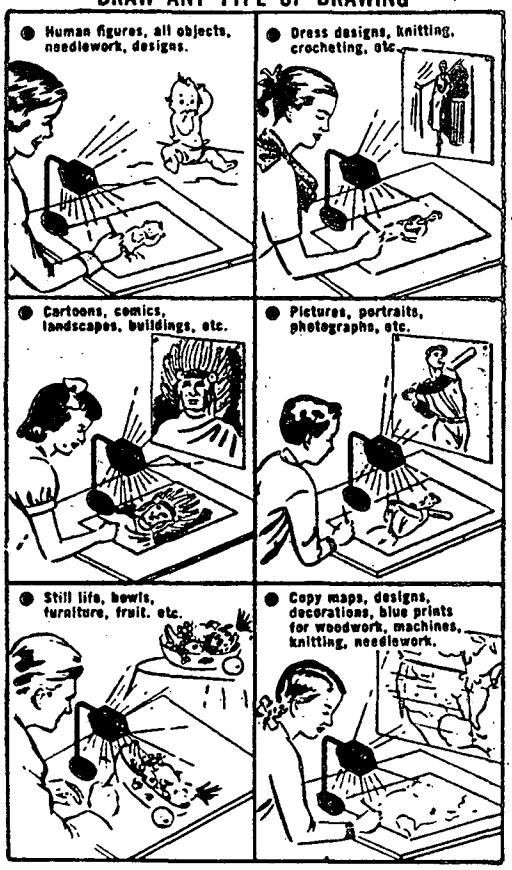
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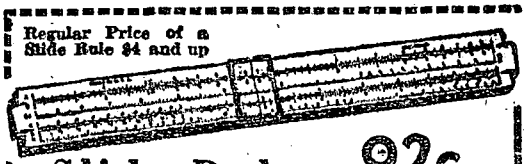

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Polly felt the tears rise beneath her lids.

"I guess he stood too long. My sister's got him."

"That bother you?" He stepped nearer, but he did not touch her.

"No." She shrugged. "I'm relieved, I guess. I don't know what's wrong with me! Here I am bringing a cobalt blue to an albino—I'm—just—not myself!"

He shook his head sadly. "Maybe you *are* yourself! For the first time in your life!"

He took another step nearer and lowered his head, but Bobbie started going wild with screams and they sprang apart. Dan made one lunge for the cage in the corner, plunged his hand into a ball of fuss and feathers and extracted a brown trimmed Australian gray from the havoc. Peace settled down upon the little cage. Venus snuggled closer to Bobbie, and Dan shut the door. He threw the little Australian gray into the air and it flew away to a curtain rod.

"Sorry, fella'," Dan murmured. "I tried. It happens that way sometimes—"

Polly was shocked. "You mean you put an Australian gray with her?" she asked aghast. "You mean while Bobbie was home pining away, you had the audacity to—"

He turned, open-mouthed and stared at her. "Look at who's talking! Didn't you try to find an albino for Bobbie?"

POLLY caught her lower lip between her teeth. "I did, but I couldn't locate one. It wouldn't have done any good, anyway. It's not white feathers he loves. It's not convenience or tradition or good breeding. *He wants Venus!*"

Dan Rollins tilted his dark head and laughed at her. From the corner, Bobbie chortled, "Mary had a little lamb—"

In two quick strides, Polly was in Dan's arms and he was kissing her

[*Turn To Page* 130]

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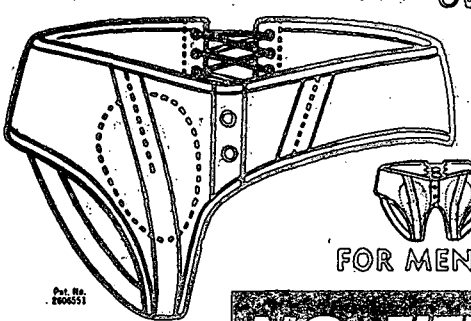

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in a manner that put even Venus to shame.

"When you first came in, you looked rather gaunt and pale," he told her, three kisses later. "Now you look wonderful! All pink and warm and lovable! It works for people, too! If you'd have stayed away, maybe we'd both have gotten bald!"

Polly snuggled closer and giggled delightedly.

"Now you're my pretty Polly again," he told her.

She backed away and looked at him. "You make me sound like a parrot!"

He grinned and squeezed her. "All right. Then I'll teach you your first lesson. Say, 'Pretty Polly wants a kiss'—"

"His fleece was white as snow!" Bobbie stuck into the conversation. "And everywhere that Venus went, Bob was sure to go!"

Polly laughed. Dan guffawed riotously.

"Your turn!" he told her between chuckles.

"Pretty Polly wants a—kiss—" she said softly, the smile fading from her face and the glow of love replacing it.

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At night when I get lonesome and
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Just longing dear for you.
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And I cannot be there
Why must we always be apart,
I ask you, "Is it fair?"
But more than this are words you said
That you no longer care.
When you said we were through for good,
My heart said, "Is it fair?"
Our love was planted like a seed,
It needs a chance to grow.
And only time and loving you,
Can ever make it so.
You never gave love half a chance,
Or knew how much was there.
And now you want to end it all,
My darling, "Is it fair?"
Tonight when you are all alone
With no one's love to share
Just stop and ask yourself for me,
I wonder, "Is it fair?"

— *Alton Chapman*

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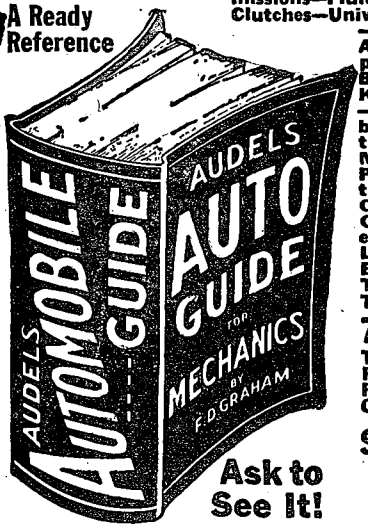

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